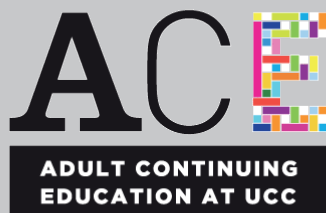


Adult Continuing Education



UCC

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Adult Continuing Education at UCC

2021 Edition

'I couldn't control how I was born but I can control how I live my life'

Sinead Kane can't fight every single battle she faces in daily life but she has fought more than her fair share on her journey to setting world records and legal precedents.

Sinead lectures on ACE at UCC's Diploma in Disability Studies but has been better known over the years as Ireland's first visually impaired solicitor, an international ultrarunner, PhD graduate, and keynote speaker.

So when she talks to her class during her Supporting Equality: Policy and Legislation module, she can point to personal experience as well as detailed knowledge of case law.

In 2017, Sinead became both the first legally blind runner and the first Irish female to complete the World Marathon Challenge, running a marathon on each of the seven continents in under seven days.

But in 2019, Sinead was initially denied her rightful place on the Ireland team for the Ultrarunning World Championships despite such ground-breaking achievements and having met the qualification standard for the 24-hour race. This was because the International Association of Ultrarunners deemed her guide runner to be 'outside assistance' and against race rules.

Sinead's response was to invite the governing bodies to suggest any athlete who would prefer to run blindfolded for 24 hours with a guide runner for the 'unfair advan-

tage' it gives.

"My guide runner was being deemed outside assistance because I was the only athlete going to be in this World Championships who had a disability.

"This is an unusual situation because people with disabilities aren't meant to achieve. People with disabilities are meant to stay in the Paralympics and stay in their own little box. They're not meant to get into able-bodied sport and they're not meant to compete alongside people who are fully able-bodied.

"Running has brought me to complete highs but that case brought me to a complete low.

"I just said to myself, 'I've sacrificed so much for this, what is the point? What is the point in me going around doing motivational speaking in schools, doing motivational speaking in companies, doing motivational speaking for people with disabilities, telling them if you work hard and if you try and succeed you will be rewarded?'

"I worked hard but I wasn't rewarded. I was being stopped solely based on my disability."

With the help of a legal team, Sinead took a court case in Monaco and the judge ruled that she had been discriminated against under Article 14 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

"A lot of people say there's no discrimination but there is. The rea-



Sinead Kane (left) became both the first legally blind runner and the first Irish female to run a marathon on each of the seven continents in under seven days. She was assisted in the challenge by her guide runner John O'Regan.
Picture: World Marathon Challenge

son why I fought that battle was because it not only affects me, it affects anybody coming behind me that's able to get to that level of able-bodied competition.

"If there is any other person with a disability to get to a 24-hour World Championship that's why I fought that and it's a precedent in sport now."

She prefaces that response with another story, from 2015, where she was sitting in an airport before a flight to another international race.

A stranger sat down beside her. At first, she assumed it was her guide runner but then he said: "I see that

you're blind. I'd like to pray with you because I believe your family is cursed."

Sinead was taken aback and when her guide runner returned, he sensed something was wrong. He asked the stranger to leave.

"The man didn't want to leave. He just felt that he needed to pray with me but in the end, he left. That's an example where if that person had stayed and been very argumentative, I would have pursued that battle.

"You're not going to be able to fight every single battle. If I was fighting every single battle every

day I would just be worn out."

Victim or victor

It's no wonder that Sinead is a renowned speaker on resilience, adversity, motivation, mindset, and inclusion, all topics of acute significance during these Covid times.

"When you're dealing with resilience, you have to focus on the things you can control. I couldn't control how I was born but I can control how I live my life.

"Nobody wants to be uncomfortable but being in uncomfortable situations is how you learn and grow, and those situations help you.

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"It keeps me alive. It gives me something to look forward to"

Sanctuary scholarships Page 10

"A radical concept takes root"

75 years of ACE AT UCC page 12

"The best investment you can make is in yourself"

Springboard to success Page 16



Sinead was awarded a UCC Alumni Achievement Award in 2017 in recognition of her inspirational accomplishments in academia, law, and sport.
Picture: Emmet Curtin

Cover Story Continued

“We live in this world where it’s all instantaneous results whereas my running and my disability have taught me to be patient. If you want to run a three-hour marathon that doesn’t happen between today and tomorrow, that takes months and months.”

“With my disability, I get things done but it might take me a small bit longer and I might get a bit frustrated. You have to be patient with yourself so that’s an advantage that I’ve learned not to expect things so instantaneously.”

“We also live in this world where everybody’s focus is on their appearance and surface-level stuff whereas, because of my vision not being great, I’m more focused on having empathy with people rather than their appearance. When you know those things, it helps you be more resilient.”

“With Covid, I know so many people are sick of it but it is going to end. There’ll be a finish line with

Covid but with my disability, there’ll be no finish line. It’s learning to accept situations, focussing on what you can control, what you can take out of the situation.

“It’s like when I was trying to get money for our sponsorship partnership for the World Marathon Challenge. I’d two companies on board but in June 2016, they dropped me because, they said, of Brexit.”

“That summer I was going to the track training every Sunday morning, doing four-hour training runs, getting up at half six, training in the lashing rain with no prospect of going on this World Marathon Challenge because I didn’t have any sponsorship.”

“I was saying to myself all that time, ‘Why am I doing this? Why am I running in the lashing rain when it’s only a 2% chance that I’m going to be going?’”

“That’s where you have to say to yourself it’s better to be prepared for an opportunity and not have the opportunity than to have an opportunity and not be prepared.”

“This time of Covid, use it as a time and opportunity to prepare and be ready for any opportunities that come in the future. And sometimes I’ve put my hope in the fact that I’ll keep preparing because an opportunity might come along and the opportunity doesn’t come along.”

“That’s where it comes down to your mindset, whether you’re a victim or a victor. You can say to yourself, ‘I spent all that time and I made all those sacrifices and it’s all for nothing’, or you can say to yourself, ‘What did I learn from that process? Going out on those Sunday mornings doing those four-hour training runs, I developed a friendship with my guide runner, I learned about my own inner strength, I learned about my fitness, and I learned about how to manage my feet when they start blistering, to problem solve.’”

“Focus in on the things you learned and the things you gained rather than the things you lost.”

Eighth continent

The switch to remote lecturing

during Covid was another challenge that Sinead faced head-on.

“At the start, I was really, really nervous. I didn’t want to do it and I was apprehensive like a lot of people but it’s the same as anything – it was the same for the World Marathon Challenge – when you get into a routine, it just becomes normal then.”

“For instance, had there been an eighth marathon and an eighth continent, I would have done it because that was just my routine every day: get up; go on a plane; get off the plane; do a marathon; get back on a plane.”

“There’s a lot of pros and cons to it. The luxury of not having to travel, the luxury of being able to switch between four or five academic articles. For me, if I was standing in the lecture theatre I would be trying to go between pages with my magnifying glass whereas on the computer I seem to be quicker because of the software I use, ZoomText.”

“I would definitely recommend doing it and I would highly recommend UCC as a university. It’s just a very nice place to work and study at because my experience when I was a student there and even now as a lecturer has all been very positive.”

“Then the con of it is you might build up a better relationship with

your students through being in person.

“I was very nervous at the beginning but I actually quite like it now.”

She has always enjoyed lecturing because it gives her an opportunity to learn too.

“I’m teaching the students but I’m also learning a lot from them. If you have an interest in a topic you’re not only going to learn from me but you’re going to learn from other people who are in the area as well. It’s a way of learning but it’s also a way of collaborating with other like-minded people.”

“It’s interesting for me to read the essays, especially because these people are often working in the sector and advocating for people with disabilities in different scenarios.”

“You hear a lot about how we’re in 2021 and how there’s no discrimination but when I’m reading these essays from people and even my own personal experience, there definitely is discrimination out there towards people with disabilities.”

The Supporting Equality module covers human rights, ableism, and national and international disability policy and laws, while the recent class essay offered a choice of topics: advocacy or law reform.

The different psycho-emotional impacts of having an acquired or born disability are discussed as well as critiques of the various models of disability, from the old medical model to the social model and human rights model.

The course addresses examples of discrimination, inaccurate public perceptions, and issues around rights violations and self-determination.

There are those future battles to be won too. Banks not accommodating people with hearing impairments over the phone by refusing to deal with interpreters or still failing to provide wheelchair ramps are examples Sinead is currently aware of, effectively refusing equal access of service to all customers.

“We talk about universal design and accessibility. This is useful for people on the course whose family members have disabilities. They learn about policy so when they approach an issue, they can be reasonable with public facility personnel at first but if the service provider isn’t being reasonable they can start quoting law and policy.”

“I would definitely recommend doing it and I would highly recommend UCC as a university. It’s just a very nice place to work and study at because my experience when I was a student there and even now as a lecturer has all been very positive.”

From Croke Park to the classroom: James Horan’s journey of self-discovery



James Horan has led the Mayo senior footballers to three All-Ireland finals in the past decade. His desire to continuously improve his management led him to UCC’s Master’s in Personal and Management Coaching, which he graduated from this year. Picture: Ramsey Cardy, Sportsfile

James, who is also a senior manager with a large multinational company, took on people across sport, business, and executive coaching, with one-on-one sessions helping to build practical experience.

“It introduces you to a load of different coaching concepts and models, the current methods, and what’s happening and changing in the coaching industry.”

Among those topics, the course examined the history and evolution of coaching, the rapport and relationship-building of coaching sessions, and different coaching types: narrative coaching; solution-based coaching; person-centred coaching; psychodynamic coaching; and cognitive behavioural coaching.

A large chunk of the course credits is accounted for by 50 hours of practical coaching experience, which sees students take on individuals from a range of disciplines to help facilitate them to unlock their potential.

“It’s about staying in that approach as opposed to having a pre-defined idea about what’s right or wrong for that person.”

He can apply those lessons to himself too, noting that he’s a much-changed manager to the man who

first took over the Mayo football team ten years ago.

“Every day is a school day. Every day you’re learning or you’re trying to do something a little bit better. The course helps you to recognise a lot of the CBC [cognitive behavioural coaching].”

“I need a bit of coaching around the thinking patterns and biases that people have, so that was a really interesting one from a general life point of view.”

“It helps you recognise the flawed thinking patterns that you have yourself. Once you recognise that you can do something about it. That was a particularly interesting module.”

The course itself brings together people from a diverse set of backgrounds.

James’ class included a retired man doing the course so he could help his grandkids as well as professional coaches, business people, and those starting new roles.

His dissertation – ‘To understand the factors necessary for a coaching programme to have a sustainable impact on employee engagement’ – brought its own lessons about the systemic reasons for coaching programmes failing: “They fail in many industries because they’re put in as a very good initiative but they’re not supplied with the resources needed to make sure they sustain and develop and grow.”

The 12,000-word project also required keen time-management skills to balance James’ work, football management, college, and family life.

“I had to defer the dissertation for a while as a result of [the Mayo job] but that was fine. It’s like anything, it’s routine. Maybe it’s a bit earlier in the morning and a bit later at night and making sure the balance is right.”

“That’s different for everyone and it takes a bit of tweaking and it can be difficult but if you get a routine to work in and you stick with it as

much as you can, that’s your best shot.”

James has since given lectures on the Coaching Master’s at UCC on leadership and building trust.

Those students are all on their own personal journeys but James feels the course will add to each one.

“It’s self-discovery – you learn an awful lot about yourself as a person.”

“There’s some self-assessment in the course, personality profiling, so you get an idea of that and then you’re introduced to the tools and ways that can help yourself and other people.”

“Whether you go into coaching or for your day-to-day job or just in general life, some of the tools that you pick up are really, really useful.”

“It exposes you to the industry and there’s great learning from a lot of that.”

Understanding criminal minds and psychological clues

Having contributed to a podcast series on one of Ireland's first serial killers, a news article on the Ted Bundy Netflix documentary, and a radio appearance on stalking cases earlier this year, Dr Ciara Staunton's insights into criminal psychology have always been in demand.

That applies to her course, The Psychology of Criminal Behaviour, too, which has seen students sign up each year to understand the workings of the criminal mind.

The two-year diploma attracts many professionals working in the area – gardai, outreach and youth workers, prison and probation officers, guidance and addiction counsellors, teachers and researchers – but also the armchair psychologists.

"I always get these older ladies who have no background but read all the crime books, right through to the professionals, and everyone in between. It's been going so well, I'm thrilled with it," says Ciara.

"People assume we need to look at the Ted Bundys of the world and those old-style serial killers but in my course, we look at very contemporary people. I'm able to give case studies of people who would be our version of Ted Bundys but lucky for us, they're already behind bars.

"My students are required as part of their course to keep up to date in the news and we always talk about the cases as they happen because that's exactly the nature of the material we're covering.

"I'm always updating my lectures with the most recent cases so I will never have the same lecture twice. The content might be the same but the cases will be new, and that's a great way to discuss or introduce topics."

The current course examined issues raised by recent murder cases in Cork, for example, but retains an international dimension, with one of the current class of 30 logging on from the Netherlands, as the course was conducted online during Covid.

The general interest in contemporary cases is huge and while the subject matter can be heavy, Ciara addresses the issues with the lightness of a forensic psychologist accustomed to studying such behaviours. As former student Julie Brady told this paper in 2019: "It's not that scary when you walk in the doors and you see Ciara's big smiley face looking up at you."

The impacts on those who study

it can be enormous, not just in terms of job promotions and further study options, but in criminal investigations too.

"We had a great example of a detective who based on doing the course had a real deeper understanding of the traits of psychopathy," says Ciara. "She then was interviewing a young fella that they suspected of a crime but the interview was going nowhere and the police can only hold somebody for a certain period of time.

"She knew enough from the course that he was never going to admit to what he had done but she knew if she could keep him talking long enough and get him to weave enough lies into a story, she could then hopefully prove those lies with corroborating evidence. That was a magnificent insight into her change and how she was doing her work as a detective."

It also improves professionals' understanding of vulnerable individuals, how to spot subtle indicators and refer appropriately so they can get the help they need. It covers the influence of trauma on individuals and what childhood trauma looks like in adults. And for those working in youth justice, it offers an insight into brain development and why tactics they may be used to utilising don't work with young people.

The course attracts an impressive range of guest speakers, including the retired assistant Garda Commissioner, the retired head of the Irish Prison Service, chartered forensic psychologists, and barristers.

"This weekend I have a past student who did the course a few years ago but one of her assignments in her second year was so good, we had it published. She's now going to come and give a talk on her work, about intellectual disability among prisoners and how these go undetected.

"As a result of that publication, she has spent the last couple of years speaking at conferences and it has really enhanced her line of work."

Totally reinvented

And while students will transition back to the classroom post-pandemic, Ciara says the successful move to online learning can broaden the pool of potential guest speakers, and students, in future.

"We're in the mindset of being so localised you forget that we could start marketing around the world if you can get the online



Responding to Problem Gambling course co-ordinators Dr Robert O'Driscoll (left) and Dr Ciara Staunton (right) at the 2019 conferring ceremony for their other programme, Substance Misuse and Addiction Studies, with graduates Judy Bradley, Carrigaline, and Mairead Kelly, Blackpool. Dr Ciara Staunton also co-ordinates the Psychology of Criminal Behaviour diploma. Picture: David Keane

system up and running. To me, that's very exciting.

"I've had to really rethink how we deliver these programmes because a three-hour session online is not the same as a three-hour classroom experience so I've totally reinvented how the course runs and what it feels like for the students.

'Very few gamblers get the support or services they need'

Ireland's first dedicated course to tackle the issue of problem gambling is to launch at UCC this summer.

With an estimated 40,000 problem gamblers in Ireland, the Responding to Problem Gambling CPD course is targeted at upskilling addiction counsellors to address a knowledge gap that has been acknowledged by practitioners working in the area.

A 2019 Government study on gambling in Ireland revealed that two-thirds of the population had gambled in the previous year, with lottery tickets and scratch cards the most common form. That same year, it was estimated €9.8bn had been gambled in Ireland, the equivalent of €27m each day, €18,650 every minute, or €2,800 per person each year.

Problem gambling, which disrupts or damages family relationships or personal life, is most prevalent in young men, which is also the group that relies least on in-per-

son gambling, with many accessing betting services on their phones – a form of gambling that has further flourished during the Covid pandemic.

The course, a collaboration between UCC and Tabor Group, brings together a mix of skill-sets, from academic expertise to the practical experiences of those working in residential addiction treatment services. Places are being funded by the Gambling Awareness Trust in recognition of the urgent need for specialist training.

"Very few problem gamblers get the support or services they need," says Robert O'Driscoll, co-ordinator of the course and addiction counsellor based at Arbour House.

"Very often practitioners report that they don't have the knowledge and skills or the role adequacy to be able to respond to gambling presentations in their work."

Gambling poses a distinct challenge for counsellors, being easier to slip

under the radar than addictions that cause visible intoxication.

"Gambling problems can go undetected for longer periods of time and the financial implications can be even more drastic for gamblers.

"People can gamble huge amounts of money and find themselves in significant debt or in some cases, may be engaged in equivalent crimes like fraud or stealing from employers or loved ones.

"Even with a significant heroin habit, you can really only use a couple of hundred euros worth of heroin in a day, whereas you could gamble thousands of euros in a day, and more in a month, and more over a year."

The definition of problem gambling, though, touches on people with behaviours broader than those addicted to such an extreme, and positive impacts can also be made on people at the less severe end of the scale.

"There are people who are struggling with their gambling behaviour, maybe finding it difficult to stop or continually relapsing, but there are many others who have difficulties with gambling, who you might not conceptualise as addicts.

"They could be functioning relatively normally in society, maybe holding down a job, going to school or college, but would be spending more than intended, or becoming stressed or distressed as a result of their gambling, or maybe relationships are suffering or families are under pressure.

"You couldn't really define that as addiction but you could respond to those people in a helpful way and support them to think about the benefits of making some changes.

"What we're trying to do is equip these professionals with the skills and knowledge to be able to respond in a more targeted way to all of the people in Irish society who are impacted with different levels of problems."

The course aims to tackle these issues without painting gamblers or the gambling industry as villains.



(inset) Lisa O'Callaghan, Manager, Biopharma HR – Operations.

Lisa O'Callaghan didn't initially take the college route after her Leaving Cert but the life experience she gained over those years has equipped her to take on two courses with ACE at UCC through her employers Pfizer.

Pfizer's partnership with ACE goes back 14 years to their collaboration on the Higher Diploma in Leadership Development, which Lisa is currently completing. That course sees UCC lecturers and industry experts visit the Pfizer plants to meet tailored training needs which helps staff enhance their work or move forward for promotion.

Over 100 staff have progressed through that course from Ringaskiddy alone, while it's also run in Pfizer's other locations at Newbridge and Grange Castle, Dublin, along with the award-winning Certificate in Operator Supervision.

"We want to get counsellors, psychotherapists, and health and social care professionals to view gambling problems along a continuum and how societal norms, policy, regulation, and the environment gambling comes in shape those problems.

"Our course is not intending to demonise gambling or gamblers or the gambling industry, or the Government for not having effective legislation in place. It's just to invite people on the course to engage with these ideas and think about them more deeply in terms of how all of these issues impact on individuals' choices around gambling."

The new environment of a world changed by Covid seems to have just shifted these problems further underground.

"What I'm understanding from various reports in the media is that there's been an increase in problem gambling since the Covid-19 pandemic, and more and more distress for individuals and families and communities as a result of that."

getting the education side of it but you're getting a lot more out of it as well. You're getting friendships, you're building up your network with the other students, but also with the lecturers that are doing the modules.

Where next? How Pfizer partnership helps people progress to meet their goals

That leadership course wasn't Lisa's first time studying through ACE, having completed the Personnel Management programme in 2009, again with the support of Pfizer.

Lisa joined Pfizer's payroll department in 2003, having previously worked as a payroll technician and office payroll manager for a number of companies. With a policy of investing in their employees, Pfizer worked with Lisa on a personal development plan where she expressed an interest in HR.

"I always liked the people end of the work so HR was always somewhere I wanted to move into," says Lisa, who is now a manager in the company's Biopharma HR – Operations team.

"In my development plan, after a few years in payroll, HR was always the number one option for me."

A restructure of the HR department in 2007 brought about that opportunity.

"From the interview, they said, 'work in the job for a year or so and then we'll support you to go back to UCC to do the Per-

Daunting

"I was very apprehensive at the start. When you read the outline of what will be done within the

course – and it'd been a long time since I'd been in college, 10 years – it was like, will I actually be able for this?"

"When I started doing the course, I went, do you know what, I actually know a lot that I didn't think I knew. Where I would have hesitated to go forward for the adult education courses, you actually have an awful lot of knowledge from working that you can bring to the course and that helped me when doing my assignments.

"For each module, I can relate the topics back to the role I'm working in and the role I'm looking to move forward to and speak about it and give my opinions.

And just as the course can surprise you for the better, you can surprise yourself too.

"I would encourage everyone to take the opportunity to go back and further your education through ACE if the opportunity arises. If you have the support of your company, family, or friends you can do it. It is hard work for a short period of time but the rewards and benefits are huge.

"You are able for it because life experience is an education. Every time I have that opportunity to speak within the modules, it's building my confidence. Then when you get your assignment results back, you go, God, I really did good there, that's great!

sonnel Management course'. So Pfizer funded me to go back and further my education for the role I was in, which was great."

Lisa has remained in HR since then, although her role has continued to evolve over the years. And as part of that continuous employee development, Lisa has continued to grow too.

"Looking at the role I was in for the last three years, I said, okay, where next? Where do I want to go within HR or even within another area of Pfizer? What do I need to do to allow me to put myself forward for a leadership or coaching role?"

"My mentor [as part of Pfizer's mentoring programme] suggested that the leadership course would be of great assistance to bring me to the next level I wanted to go to in my role."

Lisa started the first module in January 2020 and as she approaches the finish line this May, she already sees "huge benefits" from her studies. Any initial worries about taking on the course have long since melted away as she found her years of experience through work were the best possible preparation.

Daunting

"I was very apprehensive at the start. When you read the outline of what will be done within the



The Pfizer Ringaskiddy plant picture: Larry Cummins, Irish Examiner Archive

‘It was important to me to model that courage for my children’

When Karina Healy decided to return to education and work, there was no dipping her toe in the water. She dived in head-first and has never looked back.

When it happened, back in October 2015, it all happened at once. She started the Social and Psychological Health Studies diploma at ACE, UCC, got a job as a community development worker with the Lantern Project at Nano Nagle Place, and soon began a six-month leadership in the community course for good measure.

‘I walked into UCC that first day having been a mom at home for 17 and a half years rearing my children, and it felt like an alien experience for me,’ says Karina.

‘I did a CIT cert in hotel management and a dance diploma but I’d never seen myself as an academic person. I wasn’t confident about stepping into a space of learning again.

‘The first night at UCC, I remember I accepted my place at 4pm on the Wednesday and was required to be in college by 5.30pm for a class. I came straight from home with a biro from the kitchen drawer and a refill pad from one of the kids.’

While Karina was taken onto the course three weeks after the initial start date, she soon found she wasn’t alone in her worries about re-entering adult education.

‘I was full of fear and the gremlins of not being worthy and not being good enough were huge at that time. Even things like what would I wear? How would a student need to look? I didn’t know my way around UCC or where I could or should park the car.

‘All of these things were huge but when I got through the door and when I was in the classroom environment, I discovered I wasn’t unique. There were more people like me having the same experience, it just took time before the trust built up to share that journey.

‘The support was there. I didn’t even understand what the support was for but I just knew people were there to help.

‘The experience of being in UCC itself was gorgeous. It was important to me, especially as a Cork woman.

‘UCC is a special place and I knew what I was doing was right for me and important for my work. I wanted that underpinning for my work to know how I was impacting the bigger picture.’

The course ran weekly on Wednesday evenings and a handful of Sat-

urdays across the year, and while it was a juggling act with a four-day work-week and family life, Karina found the balance.

‘I went on for the second year with a little more confidence but still didn’t have a lot of faith in myself. Would I be able to master the sec-

valuable for life, my education, and my work. The graduation was a true celebration.

‘It was also really important to me that I modelled that courage for my children. Hannah is 22 now and she’s done a Master’s in Music Therapy, Ben is second year of

informed thinking about the bigger picture, as well as building on the relationship with each unique individual in front of me.

‘I love what I do and I know it’s underpinned with a very kind ethos. It’s hugely about making people feel safe and welcome, carrying on

wellbeing are so connected and I’m so delighted I took the opportunity.’

‘The most valuable thing anyone will do, timewise and financially, in their lifetime’



Lantern Project coordinator Karina Healy (right) with fellow project worker Ger O’Sullivan before Karina performed in the Goldie Chapel at Nano Nagle Place for one of the Lantern Project’s #TogetherAtHome online concerts.

ond year? But there was a lot of encouragement and I knew in my heart I wanted to get it over the line.

‘My family were after adjusting, I got a bit of help at home, I got more organised, and I used to make all the dinners on a Monday to get that done for the week.

‘I needed a lot of help with my computer skills too. At the time when I went to work, I wasn’t even able to put an attachment on an email. My technical skills were awful.

‘Even with regard to laying out an essay and things like referencing, it all happened magically. It’s still a mystery to me!’

A true celebration

Whether by magic or not, completing the course meant the world to Karina for many reasons.

‘It was just so important that I did it. There was a great sense of achievement and a huge sense of having done something that was

Commerce, and Sam is in transition year.

‘At the time, they had only seen me as a mom. Now, having done the diploma and gone back to work, practically reinventing myself really, it was so powerful. I couldn’t have done more to model for them what it is to have courage and step out into the world and take my place doing what I was passionate about.’

It also helped lead to progression in the workplace, with Karina now co-ordinator of the Lantern Project, which provides an inclusive, safe place for community development and education, allowing people to learn and grow, develop new skills, and make new friends.

‘Everything that was taught in the diploma is so transferable and important to the work I’m doing now; acting locally but thinking globally.

‘The subject matter was so interesting and so relatable to what I needed to know in order to have a more

the work of Nano Nagle, and being her living legacy. I love my work and it’s an honour to do it.’

And from learning about email attachments six years ago, Karina can now say she’s ‘blown away’ by how they’ve succeeded in moving education courses and community events online during the pandemic, enabling many people who are vulnerable to connect with the Project on a regular basis to support their wellbeing.

That’s included concerts, arts and crafts tutorials, workshops on mindfulness and meditation, cookery and singing lessons, and socially distanced gatherings at Fitzgerald’s Park or The Lough during periods of eased restrictions; all tools to help people cope and pass the time during lockdown.

‘Every opportunity for learning has only led to getting to know more people and having more relationships. There is such joy in that and it will completely be a positive thing for anyone. Learning and

Another student of the Social and Psychological Health Studies diploma who has gone on to support remote learning during Covid is Celine Griffin. A 2019 graduate, she was hired as a co-tutor for the following term’s intake of students as well as growing her own practice as a sexuality educa-

tor.

‘There were many lightbulb moments in there for me. One of the biggest things was the realisation of how everyone’s personal values are shaped by social norms and our education, up until you go into adult education, lacks the opportunity to explore things through critical reflection. It was fascinating.’

Challenges, but never barriers

That range of backgrounds was also accommodated by the lecturers when it came to addressing any hurdles students had to overcome.

‘It was a challenge as a lone parent but my family were supportive with childcare. There was a clear understanding from the lecturing staff of the challenges that are involved in adult education. For me, it was childcare but everyone has different challenges. Some people had to handwrite their essays and get someone to type them for them.

‘So, even though there were challenges, they were never barriers. And then the group itself were hugely supportive with references or book recommendations.’

Speaking about being taken on as a co-tutor after her graduation, Celine expressed similar doubts to Karina about whether she would be able for the challenge but she, too, proved her own capability to excel in a new experience.

‘I second-guessed my capacity to do it but I took on the opportunity and it has been an incredible experience. Jim [Sheehan], who I tutor with, has been an incredible

model. I’ve learned so much about facilitation through him.

‘The different perspective from me having gone through the course and seeing the group come in was fabulous. I’ve seen them progress over the last few years from being really nervous about starting essays and doing learning journals, and to see they’re nearly finished now and how everything has come together for them, it’s amazing.’

Having walked the same path, Celine was able to help add supports for students when everything turned to remote learning during lockdown. She set up virtual cafes on Zoom for students who wanted to recreate the informal group learning that comes from those coffee-break chats on campus.

‘It’s the opportunity to keep the connection there on a personal level with the group. They can support each other in resources and it takes away some of the isolation; they are still within this learning group even though they’re all sitting at home alone in front of their own screen.’

The diploma, both studying and tutoring, was the perfect foundation to do further study in sexuality and sexual health education at DCU and set the groundwork for a new business. Celine is currently working on presentations and workshops to raise awareness of sexual violence.

‘I’ve been working with the staff in a third-level institution and that has been a really big project for me this winter, which I really enjoy.

‘The plan going forward is to be out in schools and to keep deliv-



Social and Psychological Health Studies graduate and co-tutor Celine Griffin.

ering workshops with an edge; not just the biological aspect but challenging social norms and highlighting injustices around sexuality with a human rights lens and a social justice lens.’

It’s applying the real meaning behind the course where it can make the biggest difference, having experienced that impact herself.

‘This course is most likely to be the most valuable thing anyone will do, timewise and financially, in their lifetime. I really feel that. It has real meaning for everybody.

‘It’s just the life-changing and life-enhancing aspect of it, the value it can bring both professionally and personally, and also the opportunity it brings.

‘It’s led to a career change for me and it’s just a unique opportunity to explore those options and become more engaged in life and more involved in the world and find a strong voice for yourself.

‘And the supportive environment does assist everybody. You’ll never be alone in it.’

Trauma Studies course ahead of the curve in Covid times

Orla Lynch, Trauma Studies programme director and senior criminology lecturer at UCC (inset), says the online-only course is ‘focused on people who are most likely working and perhaps have not been in education for a while’. Picture: Clare Keogh



Orla Lynch, Trauma Studies programme director and senior criminology lecturer at UCC (inset), says the online-only course is ‘focused on people who are most likely working and perhaps have not been in education for a while’. Picture: Clare Keogh

There will be no shortage of case studies and research for that module in the years ahead when the impact of all this is being assessed. The same applies, over 20 years down the line, to The Troubles, with referrals still coming to WAVE Trauma Centre, Belfast, from those impacted by the conflict, including members of the younger generations.

While the course covers trauma in a variety of contexts – with modules including Trauma and Victimology, Trauma and Addiction, Trauma and Post-trau-

matic Growth, and Complex Loss: Grief, Trauma, and Social Context – it is UCC’s relationship with WAVE that led to the course being developed.

WAVE began in 1991 as Widows Against Violence Empower, a group of eight women who had lost their partner in the conflict. WAVE uses a lighthouse as its logo to symbolise a beacon of light for those coping with the aftermath of traumatic bereavement or injury and has grown in scale and scope to become the largest cross-community victims’ group in Northern Ireland.

Orla Lynch, programme director and senior criminology lecturer at UCC, had been working with WAVE on projects around victimisation resulting from terror-

ism and political violence when they decided to collaborate on this course.

‘There was no trauma training available in this format in Ireland or the UK,’ says Orla. ‘We’re a non-clinical programme for both practitioners and graduates who want to explore the impact of trauma on post-conflict environments but also the impact of broader trauma.’

‘Trauma, for example, in the case of State abuses, institutional abuses, trauma in terms of personal impact, trauma in terms of family impact, trauma in terms of frontline workers. For people dealing with Covid for the past 12 months, what’s the impact on them and their families and their working envi-

ronment?’

‘In Northern Ireland, over 80% of people knew somebody killed or injured in The Troubles and currently, with Covid, we have a whole population of frontline workers who have been exposed to extremely traumatic events, so how do we deal with that on a massive basis? Those are all questions we look at.’

The course, which receives funding from the Victims and Survivors Service in Northern Ireland, offers a scholarship system for people who were survivors of The Troubles or are victims of terrorism and political violence to ensure it remains accessible beyond a professional audience.

On that professional side, the course attracts a range of practitioners, such as clinical psychologists, counsellors, psychotherapists, nurses, paramedics, addiction counsellors, and researchers.

Opened eyes

‘It gives people a new lens, a trauma-sensitive lens, to see their work. People who are very experienced, people from a range of disciplines, have talked about how it has opened their eyes to new ways of thinking about issues they experience in work as practitioners, but also as a way of thinking about broader societal issues.

Continued on Page 8

“They’ve been a wonderful group of students and really complimentary of the experience so we’re very lucky that way.

“The course is broader than trauma too. It’s about politics. It’s about victimhood. It’s also very relevant for people who are both in practice but also in research.

“We have people who were leaders of large corporations and felt that understanding issues around trauma – for example trauma and addiction or the epidemiological issues or transgenerational issues – they felt knowing that information really strengthened their ability to do their own job.

“It’s got an application beyond the clinical and front-line worker audience.”

When asked about the dif-

ferent approaches to dealing with different types of trauma, Orla says: “Everything happens in context, and everything is politicised. For example, the notional thing of an innocent child victim: They’re accepted as a victim by society, they receive sympathy.

“However, if you look at, for example, a woman who is a victim of sexual assault, her victimhood might be denied. She might be asked, what was she wearing?”

“The experience of being a victim is one thing and the experience of trauma is another and they can antagonise each other.”

As for the online structure of the course, Orla says: “We were lucky in that it was developed as an online programme so it was developed with very rich content. It’s not a case of a programme that was turned online

with lectures just delivered over Zoom.

“It’s a tiered-learning system so what that means is you do have the face-to-face interaction every week with your tutors, you have specialist workshops with guest speakers, all online, but you also have the learning material as a guided learning process using a number of technologies.

“It’s well developed in terms of the material available and the track through the program is very much guided, very integrated, very interactive.

“It’s really focused on people who are most likely working, perhaps have not been in education for a while, and we think it’s well set up for that audience.”



It’s been a tumultuous first year in the job for Conor O’Connell since his appointment as director of the Construction Industry Federation’s southern region in January 2020.

The construction sector has spent half of the past year largely shut down due to Covid restrictions, with Conor and the CIF at the forefront of communicating on behalf of the industry in the media and representations to Government.

So Conor is well-positioned to

talk about the impact of ACE at UCC in his life but also more broadly its effect on Cork’s development.

“The UCC Diploma in Personnel Management course had a very significant impact in my career and in my life.

“It gave me a great opportunity to progress, it facilitated me with a great network of colleagues that I still interact with to this day, and it gave me the knowledge and expertise to move on in my career.

“It’s always played a very significant role, coming from an apprentice/trades background to be able to move along in my career progression to now be a director of the Construction Industry Federation.

“We’re all learning something new every day and

Lessons in climbing the career ladder

Conor O’Connell (inset), director of the Construction Industry Federation’s southern region.
Picture: Brian Loughheed

UCC and the Adult Continuing Education department, I couldn’t speak highly enough of them and what they’ve done for thousands of people around Cork who’ve benefitted from the further education provided by that department, especially for mature students or students who have taken different career paths.”

Conor completed his course, now known as the Higher Diploma in HR Management, in 2002 but those lessons have stuck with him to this day.

“I’m looking at my bookshelf here behind me in the office and I still have one or two of the books from that course that I still refer to at times.

“It was a significant help to me to be going to a college like UCC, enrolling in such a prestigious and well-respected University that has over the years significantly contributed to Cork’s development and Cork’s economic positioning because of its ability to provide continuing education to people like myself as we move jobs, move careers, and gain more experience. It’s been a great resource.”

It was halfway through the course, in 2001, that Conor got his opportunity to move jobs, joining the CIF as an executive.

“We represent construction employers so a large part of my work for the first 15 years with the CIF was all about applying

the knowledge and experience that I’d gained over the years, including the UCC course, to help employers dealing with employee relations and industrial relations issues in a very competitive commercial environment. It was a distinct help to me.”

Two decades later and Conor is still in touch with friends he made on the course and still sharing the insights gained from their collective experiences.

“I distinctly remember the people that you met, people from similar backgrounds and people from different backgrounds, but all with a great interest in the course.

“I made friends for life in some of the people I met on the course. To this day, we’ll still occasionally pick up the phone to talk to each other and tap into our network and experiences.”

The course itself was a natural fit for Conor at the turn of the millennium, having returned to Ireland after working in London and Sydney, where he got into various management roles. He felt he needed the qualifications to back up what he was doing to keep him moving up the ladder.

It was a profession he enjoyed and the course only added to that.

“The memories of the course were the excellent tutors, who had real-life experience of working in HR, industrial relations, and employee relations, so there was great practical experience and practical knowledge that the tutors were able to

impart on us.”

Indeed, the course gave Conor “an appetite to go on and do further education”, subsequently taking on a law diploma.

“I couldn’t encourage people enough to have a look at the courses that are there,” he says now. “If you’re thinking about it, it probably means you want to or need to do a course.

“Short-term, there is a significant commitment but the time flies by and the impact it will have on you will be far more significant than the short-term work that you have to put in to get your qualification.

“It’s well worth doing and what these continuing education courses do is give people the confidence to move on and progress, and that’s very important in the workplace.”

‘I do education like other people play golf. I just love it’

Ber Mulcahy was a young UCC graduate when she was hired to build the Bon Secours’ HR department in Cork from the ground up 25 years ago.

She had been working in nursing, largely as a nurse tutor, for a decade before returning to college to study HR. It was shortly after completing ACE at UCC’s Higher Diploma in HR Management in 1994 that Ber’s stars-aligning moment arrived.

She got the job as the Bons’ first HR manager, left the School of Nursing on a Friday, and sat into an empty office on Monday morning with a greenfield site to develop.

That first morning there were doubts, of course. What am I supposed to be doing here? What is this job about? But with her education behind her and a can-do attitude, she soon figured it out and spent 14 years in the job before being hired for her current role as director of nursing in 2010.

“I couldn’t even have applied for the HR job if I hadn’t that course behind me,” Ber reflects.

“I was lucky in that I understood the world of healthcare but the world of healthcare wasn’t enough to do that job if I hadn’t my higher dip from UCC.”



Ber Mulcahy, director of nursing at Bon Secours Hospital Cork, with Dr Harry Barry, author, and Fr Richard Hendrick, Capuchin Franciscan Order, at the Building Resilience Through Mindfulness conference in 2019, which was a joint venture between Bon Secours and the UCC School of Nursing and Midwifery. Picture: Gerard McCarthy

She leaned on those lessons and the policy and procedure she was able to implement to keep her “on track” but that higher diploma was just one link in the chain of courses that Ber has taken over the years.

A Personnel Management certificate in CIT gave her the taste

for lifelong learning and after graduating from UCC and setting up the Bons’ HR department, she had the urge to do a four-year Business degree in UCD.

Moving into the Director of Nursing role caused her to reflect on the changes in nursing

since she had switched to HR. More nurses were now seeking career direction so she returned to ACE at UCC to take the Higher Diploma in Coaching and Coaching Psychology, which opened her eyes to the world of mindfulness and led to a UCD Master’s in Mindfulness Based Interventions.

Currently completing a Theology degree, Ber reveals with a chuckle that she is already planning her next master’s, either in medical ethics or spirituality.

The hunger

“I do education like other people play golf. I just love it,” she says.

“I was very hungry when I got a taste of it in CIT and it’s amazing how one course leads to the next. Once you do one, you become hungry for knowledge. The hunger, it gets to you eventually.

“I really, really enjoyed my years in UCC and everything I’ve ever learned, I’ve used. The HR was invaluable to me, the Business Degree was invaluable to me, the Master’s in Mindfulness, the Coaching, when you can put into practice what you learn, it becomes very valuable.”

She’s not just a committed student either. Four years after graduating from that HR Management course, Ber was lecturing the core HR module and continued to do so until 2015.

“Between my practice and my education, I saw UCC were looking for a part-time lecturer. I loved HR, I really enjoyed the job, but I also had my background in lecturing so it brought my old life back again.

“I loved standing in front of a classroom, I loved imparting knowledge, so it gave me the opportunity to impart the knowledge I was now doing every day.

“I loved telling students where I got it right but more important, I loved telling them where I got it wrong and what I learned from getting it wrong because there’s

an amount of learning in getting it wrong.”

The students enjoyed it too as those classes were filled with those daily bread-and-butter examples of the rights and wrongs of working in HR.

She used to ask her class about the tendering process involved in their company buying a €100,000 piece of equipment and they would give the full A to Z of checks that would be carried out by a team of people.

Then she would ask, how long does it take you to do an interview to recruit somebody? How many would you put on an interview panel? Do you always take the time to follow up on references?

As was often the case, one person carrying out interviews squeezed into half an hour didn’t come close to matching the tendering process for capital investments, especially when you take into account the far greater expenditure on that employee’s wages over, say, 20 years and the additional costs of a bad hiring decision.

Greatest asset

“I recruited quite a number of people off that course myself so quite a number of the graduates worked with me afterwards as HR specialists.

“I would always say, I don’t think somebody should work in

HR unless they’re qualified. I wouldn’t let a nurse work unless they’re qualified, we wouldn’t let a doctor work unless they’re qualified. Whether we like it or not, it’s a very specialist role.

“I still use it as my motto that people are our greatest asset. Capital depreciates in value, people will appreciate in value if you manage them right.”

She describes her current job as director of nursing in simple terms: “It’s making sure you empower the population of nurses, that you have the right people in the right place at the right time doing the right thing and they’re all doing it safely. That really is your role.”

She seeks to create a “contagious calm” which fits neatly with the mindfulness-based stress reduction programme that is offered for free to all staff who are chosen to pursue it. The aim is for nurses to keep their heads when others around them are losing theirs amid the chaotic situations and emergencies with which they are often faced.

The stresses of the job have only been exacerbated by Covid with staff often having to wear layers of personal protective equipment for 12 hours a day.

“Apart from the heat, the pressure, and the environment, sometimes in the really busy days some of them found it hard to get a tea break, found it hard

to get a lunch break, found it hard to get toilet break.

“So I said to them, ‘Okay, let’s look at the glass half full here rather than half empty. What opportunities can you use to rest your mind for one moment and give you time to gather your thoughts?’”

Thus, a research piece with Trinity College’s School of Psychology was born.

“I said, ‘What do you do incessantly in the Covid environment? You wash your hands or you put on hand gel. Can we develop a mindfulness technique around hand-washing and putting on hand gel?’”

“Then the washing of our hands is not just about a frantic washing of the hands, it’s also the 40 to 60 seconds where I’m going to stop, take a breath, and take stock of where am I emotionally at right now.

“It’s what we call an informal mindful practice but it’s a very valuable one. Just consider, if you find it beneficial you could have on a very busy unit where you’re washing your hands 100, 200 times a day, you have 200 opportunities to rest your mind and take stock of what’s going on.”

That work has been published and the next step is to have it implemented, and then, hopefully, audit its impact.

Ber doesn’t just preach about the possibilities of mindfulness, she’s a devoted user of those techniques too. She applies it in certain informal situations, driving to and from work, while queuing in a supermarket, and using STOP signs as a reminder – Stop, Take a breath, Observe what you’re feeling, and that gives you choice over how you proceed.

It has made her less reactive to situations, and more responsive.

“I thought at first mindfulness was a new-age technique but Pat O’Leary and Hugh O’Donovan [from the Higher Diploma in Coaching and Coaching Psychology] really opened up the world of mindfulness to me.

“There’s a really strong psychological academic base to this thing. That clicked for me. It’s the essence of stress management for some people.”

Like everything else that’s clicked for Ber through education, the key all along the journey has been choosing courses she knew she would enjoy.

“Take on the course, eat the elephant in small bites, and celebrate your achievements. Really do celebrate every module and celebrate every assignment.

“It’s an investment for life. And when you start using what you’ve learned, you’ll go back.”

Sanctuary scholarships: *'It keeps me alive. It gives me something to look forward to'*

While Ireland has spent much of the last year under lockdown, those in direct provision have been living a life under lockdown for much longer.

The past year has been especially tough for those people already operating with such restrictions on their freedom in a broken system that retraumatizes those seeking our help.

The overcrowded shared accommodation came under further scrutiny during the pandemic, which also extended the indefinite delays to asylum applications, exacerbated the insufficient care and supports, and added to the sense of isolation. In February, the Government announced plans to abolish the system by 2024.

In the meantime, UCC will continue its work in providing opportunities to study for asylum seekers and refugees through its ACE Sanctuary Scholarship scheme.

The third year of the scholarships saw 27 students take a range of courses, including seven who started at UCC in 2019 and have progressed into further study.

Sithabiso Ncube may not have got to visit the campus yet but UCC and her return to education, studying the Certificate in Mental Health in the Community, have meant so much to her.

"It's been a great thing because the last time I went to school was 20 years back. Yeah, my first time in uni, it's a big thing. It means a lot to me.

"When I started studying, we were offered laptops because we couldn't go to school because of the restrictions, which has been very useful for doing my assignments. We got a bursary as well so we can always make sure we've got internet, not to miss class.

"Getting to start with UCC was a huge step. Something that I never even dreamt of, especially now at my age.

"It keeps me alive. It keeps me going for something to look forward to. It means a lot."

The process of getting onto the



Sithabiso Ncube (centre) with her youngest son Eldone Nyoni (second from right) at the All in the Same Boat family fun day in Cork City, hosted by Meitheal Mara as part of Mental Health Awareness Week in 2019. Also pictured are (left to right) Sithulisiwe Moyo, Rochen Sibandu, and Thokozile Mpofo.

Picture: Damian Coleman

scheme was not like anything Sithabiso was used to from her dealings with the State: "It was very easy with the scholarship. I did an English test and they were nice people, it was that easy. I couldn't believe it."

Having left education after completing her O-Levels back home in Zimbabwe in 1999 until taking an initial mental health course in 2019, Sithabiso was amazed when she found herself up to the task of writing academic essays.

"I stayed at home for 20 years and then I started studying. But when I realised I can write the assignments, I couldn't believe it. I thought I wouldn't manage when they said write 2,000 words.

"I was like, where are they coming from? How can I write 2,000 words? But I'm doing it.

"I was never a bright student. Yes, I could understand, I could do things in school, but I wasn't

someone... I needed to study. But anyone can do it. You can take your book, give yourself two hours, you read what you have to read, you research what you have to research, then, at the end of the day, you can keep it and take it back to the community.

"The sanctuary message from UCC is spreading."

Those studies are also a daily release from life in lockdown and an injection of hope for the future.

"The scholarship is really helping, especially the four or five of us at the direct provision [centre] that got the scholarship. It's keeping us busy, looking forward for something to do, other than sitting and not doing anything.

"You have hope of seeing yourself doing something one day. I love working with people, I love seeing different people and helping them where I can. It

doesn't have to be financially, it can be emotionally.

"At times, I also feel like if I didn't do the mental health course, I would really be depressed by now because every time I think of lockdown, I feel like it's too much. I understand people being depressed but those things that we do in class, writing three things that you appreciate every week and you look at them and then you're like, oh, thank God I'm here."

For Philisiwe Zuma, a student on the Diploma in Autism Studies, the course was a welcome distraction.

"It keeps me busy and helps me keep focused away from the fact that I'm in direct provision. I feel like if you keep busy then you don't get to sit and think about everything you're going through. [You can] just push it aside and do what you're supposed to do."

Philisiwe had previously stud-

ied in Limerick a decade ago before returning to South Africa for a job as an executive assistant. She progressed into a better role and stayed on until 2018 before she had to leave.

She took up Nursing Studies at McEgan College in Macroom and got a job working with the elderly in the area, which she has balanced with her part-time studies at UCC since October. During the course of the conversation, Philisiwe realises it's her one-year work anniversary – a thought that makes her very happy.

"When I did my Level 5 in Nursing, it was a totally new thing to me. It was like coming out of the shade and just exploring something new.

"It was actually the best decision I've ever made because in the health sector you can learn and you just never stop learning. You can expand and explore different areas of it. It's an oppor-

tunity for me."

Saved my life

There have been unspeakably difficult times too, both in the move to Ireland and living under direct provision.

"It was a huge change [coming to Ireland], considering the fact I had to leave my daughter as well. It was a huge decision that I had to think about for some time if I was sure this was what I really wanted to do.

"But I had no choice. I really had no choice because I moved to save my life."

As for direct provision?

"It's been tough. It's been tough to a point where I've had to attend counselling because of depression, especially around the time when I couldn't even go to school or anything like that.

"The fact that we had to share a room – there were three of us, all from different backgrounds, and it was really difficult for all three of us, not just for me.

"One person wants to sleep at 8 o'clock, one person wants to stay up and watch movies, one person just wants to be on the phone with their family. It was hectic in that way.

"The fact that you also had to share a bathroom, it's like you are in each other's faces all the time.

"It's basically the lack of space, the nutrition, and the way I felt I was treated was almost as if I'm on house arrest. It's like you're in direct provision as an asylum seeker so you only should be here where we put you, you're not allowed to do anything else.

"It's not an easy thing to go through. It just feels like there's this thing hanging on top of your head, watching you all the time, and the way that management within the direct provision would be speaking to you if you ever needed help or anything like that."

Receiving her work permit in 2019 was some relief but the process of applying for asylum is an ongoing worry.

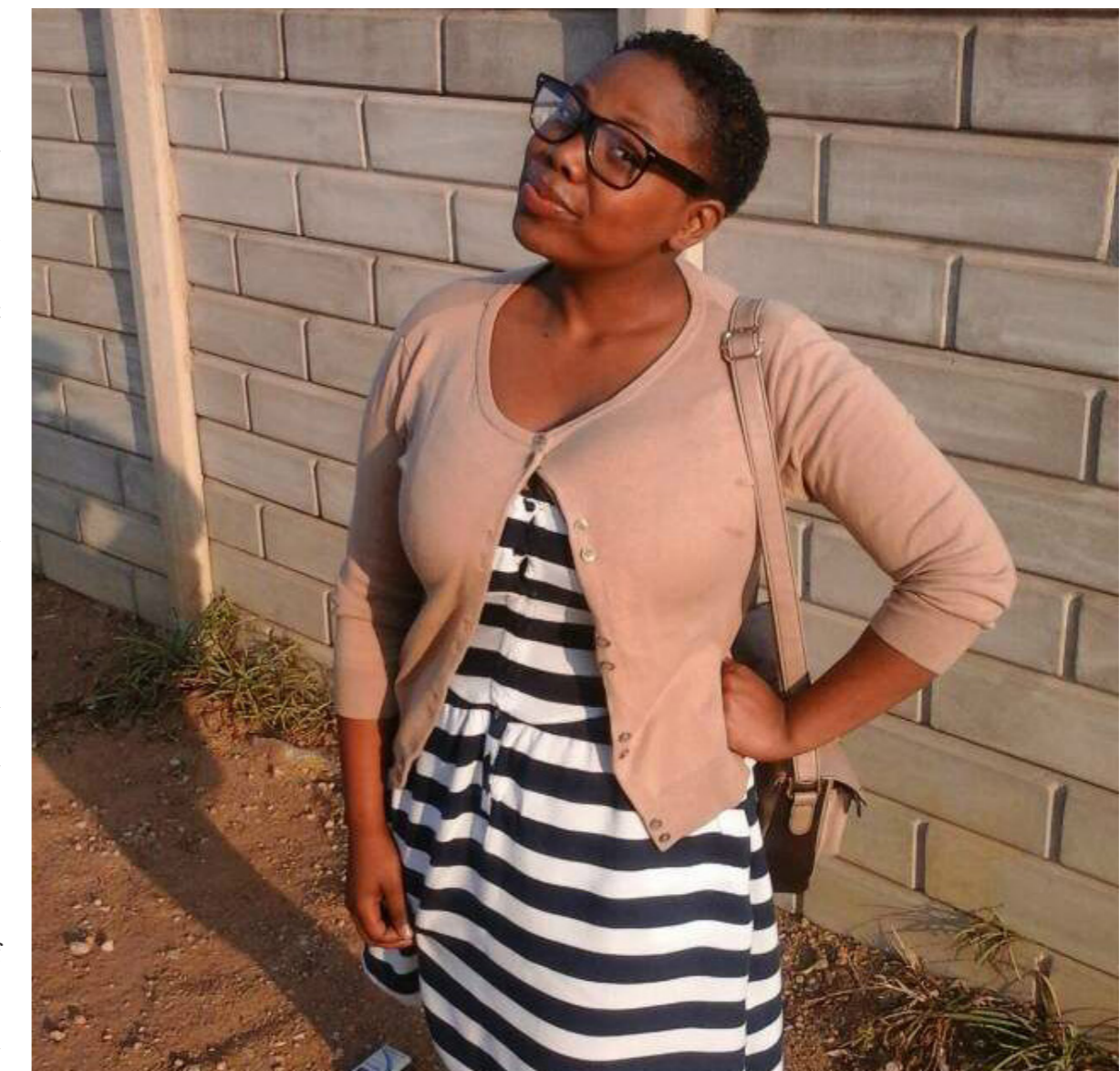
"It's daunting. I find it very difficult to actually sit and say this is what I'm going to tell you. I've been talking to you now, I've only just given you a summary of what I went through, that's the best I can do on my side. I feel I were to change that and try to be more open, maybe the

process would not be as brutal as appears to be.

"When we are going through this, we don't feel like the Government is trying to help us. It's more like we're being interrogated for what we went through.

"It's like I came to you for help but then you're putting me under light, you're asking me questions in a way that I feel like you're attacking instead of trying to understand what I'm trying to tell you what I went through. It doesn't help things."

Sithabiso has been in Ireland for three years since moving from Zimbabwe with her husband and two boys.



Philisiwe Zuma

"It wasn't easy [the move]. When you pick up your clothes and say you're leaving your family and your parents and you don't know when you're going to see them... it's a big decision."

In the last three years, Sithabiso has only once received an interview date for her application for asylum. That interview, in March 2020, was cancelled and has not been rescheduled: "I ha-

ven't heard anything after that. It's been three years for me here in Ireland and nothing."

Living as a family of four in one room is another stress.

"I don't know if people know how difficult the situation is staying in a room as a family. My eldest son is 19 years old, living in one room, it's so crowded.

"It's a lot of families in one building, 34 families and it's only 34 rooms. You have 100-and-something people in the building.

"When at times you sit down and look at it, I understand when they say someone died by suicide. I try not to put it in mind.

He hopes to follow his mother into college by doing Sports Science or Physiotherapy once he has completed his Leaving Cert this summer.

The Macroom Friends of Asylum Seekers group were also helpful in donating laptops to students when school transitioned online.

"People in Macroom are really welcoming," says Sithabiso. "There are people who can be negative but I understand that we are strangers. But most people welcome us. We feel at home."

Of course, there can be issues with remote study too. Philisiwe was moved out of her direct

Provision Centre to a relative of hers whose child has autism to help her get a grasp on the course initially. Her favourite element now is the applied behaviour analysis, which seeks to strengthen children's social skills.

"It's very interesting to know there's so much that can be done and it's still being researched now. It's fascinating," says Philisiwe.

Bucket list

And despite the online element, there have been opportunities to build relationships with classmates from a range of backgrounds.

"Some of them I thought were doctors because if you read their comments you'd be like, 'Oh my God, what is that? I'll have to Google it. How do I not know that?'"

"But then I realised that no, the people here are on different levels and from different backgrounds. Some of them teach kids with autism and some are doing the course because they have a child with autism."

Sithabiso adds: "Even though we didn't get to see the classmates and make friendships, we did a group poster at home. I'm used to them to an extent that now I can even send them a message in that group.

"We completed it [the project] but we're still sending messages and helping anywhere we can. It's really nice.

"I would love to see UCC. I'm finishing my year but I've never seen the classes, I've never seen the library.

"It made us miss those things because of Covid. Otherwise, it's good so I really appreciate it happening to me. There's plenty of students, the young ones, who would have loved to go there and enjoy it as well. But I thank Hosannah I am still alive.

"Hopefully I will register again for the diploma or something. I'm really thinking of doing that.

"Maybe next year is going to be the same but hopefully we'll get a chance to go there and see everything and feel like a student.

"It's a privilege really, the scholarship. Some of the things were on the bucket list because they will never happen, but they made them possible."

provision centre in Millstreet to live with a colleague in the rural Cork countryside.

"At the moment, my challenge is I was moved to temporary accommodation because of Covid so my internet access is limited. Sometimes, I get to log in on Canvas on the day the material gets released. Sometimes, it takes two to three days when the internet is very bad."

Her eldest son, Sheldon, loves sport. He competes in the 100m, 200m, long jump, and triple jump, winning two bronze medals at the All-Irelands in Ath-

A radical concept takes root: 75 years of ACE at UCC



The first Diploma in Social and Economic Science class pictured in the UCC Quad at the end of their first year in May 1947. UCC president Alfred O'Rahilly is holding his hat in the front row (centre)

Next October 14, ACE at UCC will celebrate its 75th anniversary.

It was on that date in 1946 that the first formalised adult education course in Ireland was launched at UCC but the tradition of Cork as a lifelong learning hub goes back much further.

It's a tradition that can be traced as far back as the city's foundation as a monastic settlement and more formally to the Royal Cork Institution, founded in 1803. UCC was founded in 1845 and its history of reaching beyond the campus walls to adult learners and removing barriers to education dates back to 1911.

Bertram Windle and Alfred O'Rahilly, two UCC presidents who fought like cats and dogs during their six-year overlap in the University, were the key drivers of these developments.

Windle was an English anatomy professor who was knighted by King George V in 1912 and had links to the Sommerville family in West Cork. Appointed president of Queen's College, Cork, in 1904 – it was renamed UCC in 1908 – Windle introduced the landmark University extension lectures in 1911.

These took the form of short courses aimed at young farmers or young businessmen, who would come onto the campus for a fortnight to study subjects aimed at improving their agri-

cultural or business practices.

"Windle did play a very important role," says Alan McCarthy, a historian working on a book about ACE's history to coincide with the 75th anniversary.

"He was very much a moderniser in UCC. He was chair of both archaeology and anatomy, he set up the first journalism course in UCC in 1910, which was the first course of its kind in the country, and then inaugurating these adult ed short courses in 1911."

In 1914, Alfred O'Rahilly became an assistant lecturer at UCC and along with Timothy Smiddy, an economics professor, they took the extension lectures to a wider audience with a series of economic conferences in 1916.

"The economic conferences were huge in the development of this idea of adult education and highlighted the radical idea adult ed was at the time."

"O'Rahilly spoke years later about this prominent unnamed individual in the University who was cautious about the economic conferences because, apparently, he said he didn't want a couple of hundred tramps on campus."

"But the conferences themselves got massive coverage in the *Workers' Republic*, James Connolly's newspaper. Even weeks before the Rising, on page one

Connolly's talking about how the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour and the cause of labour is the cause of Ireland, and then on page six they'll have a really detailed report on this adult education conference in UCC."

When Smiddy and O'Rahilly didn't send Connolly a report on one of the lectures and he read about it in the *Cork Examiner*, he publicly admonished them for publishing in the "capitalist press". In a letter of apology, which Connolly printed, they said the omission was due to "our anxiety not to trespass too much" on "your valuable space", adding, "Your complaint shows a measure of interest for which we had hardly hoped."

"It's quite humorous," says Alan, "but it does highlight the radical nature of ordinary workers and trade unionists engaging with the University and educating themselves. We take it for granted now whereas 100 years ago, it was a radical concept."

A fortnight after that letter, Connolly was leading the Dublin Brigade in the Easter Rising, during which he was seriously wounded by a bullet. He was subsequently executed by firing squad at Kilmainham Gaol for his part in the rebellion.

Plain Pat Murphy

The political fallout and movement towards war created fault lines within UCC, notably between Windle and O'Rahilly.

cally active, writing policy documents and election literature for Sinn Féin, being elected to Cork City Council in 1920, and being arrested in the UCC chaplain's house at 4am one morning in 1921 and interned for a total of six months on Spike and Bere Islands. During the treaty negotiations, O'Rahilly and Smiddy both acted as advisers to Michael Collins.

When Cork and UCC returned to business as usual, the public lectures continued although not on as formal a footing as the earlier conferences and short courses. O'Rahilly, who became UCC president in 1943 although he was said to have acted as a 'de facto president' for years prior, remained central to those lectures, driven by Christian social justice and social-democratic values.

The first-ever ACE course, the Diploma in Social and Economic Science, launched a year after the conclusion of the Second World War and has been characterised as a Red Scare reaction to the rise of Communism but Alan says that while O'Rahilly was anti-Communist, the launch was the culmination of 35 years of adult education initiatives rather than a post-war reaction.

That first course was oversubscribed, with 34 students, all men, representing eight trade unions and 20 firms, accepted for classes on five subjects: economics, accounting, business and secretarial practice, sociology, and modern social organisation. There were also seminars on public speaking and the conduct of meetings.

The *Cork Examiner* summary of O'Rahilly's opening address read: "The course being inaugurated now was the culmination of an endeavour to bring the College in touch with the ordi-

nary people of the city."

O'Rahilly added: "The idea that one class is inferior to another and must not get every advantage is out of date. "We are in a new era of democracy, whether we like it or not. This is the first real attempt – the only attempt I know of – of a university opening its doors to the workers and putting them on the same level as the other college students. For that reason, it is an historic occasion. "We expect Cork to give a lead once more to the rest of the country."

In June 1948, the first 24 graduates were awarded their diplomas in UCC's Aula Maxima, with O'Rahilly hailing a "pleasant and profitable association" and "a comradeship which will not end today". Before the year's end, the course had been extended to centres in Limerick and Waterford, and to Clonmel and Killarney by the following year.

ACE soon adopts the idea of bringing these courses to people beyond the major population centres. In 1951, O'Rahilly said: "Since so many people cannot come to us, we have decided to go out to them. City people have plenty of educational and cultural facilities as well as opportunities for study and for discussion. It is time for us to help those in the countryside to equip themselves not only technically but as responsible citizens who should from their own ranks produce their leaders and their spokesmen."

At the time, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, was the leading sociology institution in Ireland so when tutors were being appointed by ACE, the local priest was often called upon. Indeed, after his retirement in 1954, O'Rahilly himself became a priest.

"That's obviously imbuing the courses with this religious ethos," says Alan, "but how deliberate was it? It's difficult to say whether it was just a natural consequence of an awful lot of priests being educated in sociology at the time but it takes a while for the courses to shed their Catholic-right ethos."

Rural courses

Smaller towns and villages across Munster become regional centres for courses like Rural Social Science for local farmers and Domestic Science, aimed at



Alfred O'Rahilly after his first arrest in a photo from intelligence files of the Sixth Division of the British Army.

He was noted as being registrar of UCC and, incorrectly, director of Sinn Féin propaganda.

Evening Echo 1896-current, 14.02.1931, page 4

UNIVERSITY EXTENSION (Under the Auspices of University College, Cork, and of the Cork Workers' Council).

A PUBLIC LECTURE ON

"ECONOMICS:

Principles and Practice"

will be delivered by

REV. LEWIS WATT, S.J., M.A.
(Author of "Capitalism and Morality," etc.)
in the Examination Hall.

University College, Cork,

ON
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Dr. Merriman, President of the College,
will preside.

Admission Free. Entrance by New College Gate.

A notice for a public economics lecture delivered by Rev. Lewis Watt at UCC in the Evening Echo from February 1931

housewives, as well as Sociology classes.

"You can just see them spiral outwards. It almost happens a town at a time. It goes from Cork to Clonakilty then Castle-townbere, and then you get this wonderful spread throughout Kerry as well.

"Throughout the '60s and '70s, that explodes everywhere. Kilmallock will have a course and then two years later, Bruff will have their own centre.

"The rural courses were absolutely integral to the formation of Macra na Feirme as well because Macra grew out of this idea of these farmers meeting up in community halls for lectures. There's like half a dozen former presidents of Macra came through the Rural Social Science course."

Back then, the numbers completing their Leaving Cert were small and those progressing to university smaller again. UCC may have grown to accommodate over 20,000 students but it employs more staff now (over 2,500) than it had students until the 1960s.

"It must have seemed a very small place," says Alan, "so for UCC to expand into the rural courses in towns and villages and take the mountain to Mohammad is absolutely remarkable, really trailblazing stuff."

An account from Willie McAuliffe, who joined ACE in 1971, recalled the department having two offices, one for the director and the other with three staff members cramped into an overcrowded room.

"I travelled the highways and byways of Munster bringing courses to all kinds of schools and draughty halls," wrote McAuliffe.

"Up to 1990, 303 diploma courses were given in 99 different centres throughout Munster. Records show that, as we entered the '90s, interest in the courses was still as great as ever. However, without serious consideration, major changes were introduced and numbers dropped sharply."

Alan reflects that by then, ACE had helped to build an infrastructure of organisations that took its place.

"There's this strange paradoxical element to it that by the time the rural courses are declining, ACE has put the tools in place

for it to be succeeded by organisations that it contributed to the founding of, like Macra, and provided leaders to, like the Irish Countrywomen's Association, and you had a lot of VECs filling the gaps as well.

"There's an increase in centralisation in terms of increased research output, increased investment, and the growth of the array of courses available intramurally in UCC while the extramural courses are shrinking."

There's an expansion of courses run in collaboration with industry and also a growth in the hobbyist-style of short courses, which were sometimes used as an experimental laboratory for topics that grew into full courses.

Over the years, ACE graduates went on to accomplish remarkable achievements and become leaders in their own community. On that very first course, one of three students to graduate with first-class honours was Seán Casey, who was later a Labour TD

and the lord mayor who welcomed John F Kennedy to Cork.

"There's just so many examples of graduates from ACE who had high regional or national profile but so many graduates were just go-getters in their own small town. Every small town has people like that who just seem to be involved in everything," says Alan.

"That's O'Rahilly's prophecy self-fulfilling because his vision was this idea that those who took the courses would become leaders within their community.

"One thing from my interview with Dr Stephen O'Brien, School of Education and former lead researcher at ACE at UCC, was what he was calling a neo-liberal approach to adult education, that we're so keen to emphasise the success stories.

"Michael J Noonan did a course with UCC and went on to become Government minister, which is fantastic, and Seán Casey went on to become Lord

Mayor and met JFK and it's an amazing story but then there's the more mundane everyday ones.

"So there's a report in the *Examiner* in the '60s about the Domestic Science course in Mitchelstown and all 17 of the young wives had a fantastic time and learned so much. In many respects, that's more what adult education is about than your lord mayors and Government ministers.

"The everyday, ordinary people alongside the more prominent personalities."

The diversity of programmes and the backgrounds of students have changed considerably over the decades but for ACE's 3,000 learners today, it remains about bringing education to the masses irrespective of age, location, or prior learning experience, whether those students become leaders or simply enjoy learning.

'How can we respond in a way that's useful to the people that need us?'

The 75th anniversary of ACE isn't just about looking in the rear-view mirror, it's about looking ahead to the next 75 years too.

There are lessons to be learned from the past, and especially from the past year which has seen a seismic disruption to the way students have been accessing education from UCC. The pandemic will end someday but education will never be the same again.

And while there's been a lot of changes in the last 75 years and plenty more to come in future, it remains about providing for the people who need ACE, and extending that reach to groups who have not been given the educational opportunities they should have received.

Director of ACE Dr Séamus Ó Tuama, who told this paper in 2019 about his own negative experiences of education before going to UCC as a mature student, and assistant director Lyndsey El Amoud sat in on a Zoom call with Stephen Barry to lay out their vi-

sion for the future.

Stephen Barry: For the 75th anniversary of ACE, we're looking forward as well as backwards and tackling the big question: Where does ACE go into the future?

Séamus Ó Tuama: There are two kinds of looking forward. One is the immediate emerging from Covid looking forward and in the last year, there's been a massive shift to online, obviously, which happened with very little disruption.

The other thing that was interesting was people were presuming that digital natives would be better able to cope with online learning but some of the research shows that people who are 25-plus can handle it better than those who are younger.

Stephen: Is there a reason for that?

Séamus: It's not whether you're a digital native or not, it's to do with a lot of other things in terms of the way you learn. That's one of the big breakthroughs for us – not

that we weren't thinking about this but the fact we had to move so quickly and drastically has put us in a different place.

Lyndsey El Amoud: It's shown us that there's a huge appetite for part-time learning all over the country. People who wouldn't have been able to access us before, this gave them the opportunity to do so because they could come online.

People with disabilities or in parts of the country that aren't within commuting distance of an institution, this opened up pathways to higher education for them. We've had people from all over the country enrol in our courses this year that we wouldn't have had if we were restricted to the physical classroom.

Séamus: Likewise with the short courses. There was a sense that because a lot of our short course people are retired, they wouldn't have been able to cope with this transformation but again that wasn't a significant issue.

Older people started using things like Zoom,

Skype, or FaceTime to stay in touch with their families and friends so it wasn't such a huge move for them to go online in terms of the learning environment.

The downside, of course, is that you don't really meet people as well on the current platforms. I mean we're three talking heads here and it's fine at one level but if we're three strangers we're going to stay three strangers.

Lyndsey: It's very hard to replicate having a coffee outside the classroom for 10 minutes in the middle of the three-hour session, or the chat sitting down with the person next to you waiting for the lecturer to come in.

That's why it's important to say we certainly won't be getting rid of the physical classes. There's room for both and there's a need for both because some learners really need that social interaction with their peers.

And there are other people who will be very open to staying online

because it's easier to balance in their own lives so, for us, it's keeping a blend of both going forward.

Stephen: In the immediate future would that be some courses online and some courses not, or blended courses offered online and in-person?

Lyndsey: There's going to be three avenues. There's going to be fully online courses, and even prior to Covid we had two courses, Trauma Studies and Autism Studies, that were 100% online and were designed to be so from day one.

We have some master's programmes in Coaching and Mindfulness-Based Wellbeing that have now merged into a blended space where the evening classes during the week will be online but there will be five or six Saturday block sessions that will be in person over the course of the year.

And then there'll be other programmes that will continue entirely in the classroom.

Séamus: But even the ones that are entirely in

the classroom, to some extent they're all blended now because virtual learning environments were there for the face-to-face as well. There was material online for those programmes anyway so it's more of a continuum rather than black and white.

There will be some programmes in the future that will be 99% face-to-face but it's hard to imagine any future programme that's not engaging with the technology. That would be like saying we're not going to recognise printed books because it's a new phenomenon. The UCC library is overwhelmingly electronic too, even before any of this happened.

We're in the digital world and digital is going to be part of almost every conceivable programme from here on.

Stephen: For next September, is a return to the classroom likely or will that be an online world for the foreseeable future?

Séamus: We've made the same decision we made this time last year.

Lyndsey: It's going to be online for semester one.

Séamus: For that level of planning there are so many variables and you

Director of ACE Séamus Ó Tuama and Assistant Director Lyndsey El Amoud chat with a graduate after UCC ACE's spring conferring ceremony in 2019.

Picture: David Keane

could have all your ducks in a row and then something happens or somebody gets Covid and the whole thing is cancelled.

With the number of courses we have, the number of students, the number of everything, it would be very hard for us to plan with too many contingencies so we've tried to keep it as straightforward as we can.

Stephen: Before leaving the past year, are there other lessons to bring forward into the future?

Lyndsey: The resilience of the ACE team and the commitment to the mission of lifelong learning and adult education really.

No matter how difficult it seemed last year – moving classes online overnight, helping students and lecturers get up to date with the technology, and figuring out what needed to be done – everybody in ACE just put their shoulder to the wheel and said this has to happen for our students.

It was stressful and there was a lot of firefighting but everyone was so committed to making it work for the students that there was this energy, this momentum to push forward and get done what needed to be done.

Stephen: Thinking about the long-term future and how ACE will evolve into the next 75 years, are there plans or ideas floating around on how that'll take shape?

Séamus: What's interesting is you look at 75 years ago and you'll see the classroom, the black and white photographs, and it's all men and it's obviously a very different world but even then, what ACE was doing was being responsive to community need.

These were men in trade unions who had gained certain prominence in their fields but lacked formal education to get them to the next level. No matter what timeframe you drop into, the ACE way of thinking is still the same:

How can we respond in a way that's useful to the people that need us?

That's the one thing I hope won't change and I don't think it will change; that ACE will continue to be responsive to community need and say, what is it the world wants from us now?

Of course, the programmes will be different, the way of delivering them will be different, the people in the classrooms will be different, the classrooms themselves will be different, but there is that one common thread going through right from the start and I'd like to think it would go on into the future.

Lyndsey: That ethos within ACE of being responsive and also being proponents of social justice has always been there and will always continue.

"We've had people from all over the country enrol in our courses this year that we wouldn't have had if we were restricted to the physical classroom."

We really want to provide access to marginalised groups. We've seen the success of initiatives like the sanctuary scholars and the Traveller women on our programmes and we would love to be able to expand those initiatives and meet the needs of more marginalised groups so that they're not so excluded from society.

As well as that, hopefully, we'll continue to innovate, develop new courses in response to what's needed, but there's also an opportunity for us going forward to lobby more for the space of adult education and lifelong learning in terms of lobbying Government for the return of grants for part-time students and increased funding for part-time education because that's so important.

There's been an overfocus in recent years on the skills agenda on a national level and while schemes like Springboard+, HCI [the Human Capital Initiative], and July Stimulus are fantastic and they are very much needed and they are at the core of what we do, we don't want that to be to the detriment of other people's needs in society.

While the skills agenda tends to focus on skills for big industry, for the IT sector, for biopharma, we have courses like Youth and Community Work or Disability Studies where students return to education and they either get the skills they need to access a new career path or progress them further in their career. I don't think those programmes should be forgotten about.

We will certainly continue to beat the drum loudly on that one because it's about learners deciding for themselves what skills are needed. It's that self-determination of a learner as to where they see their lives going and the direction they want to move in.

Séamus: We need the capacity within the system to be flexible and to do things that no national policy will pick up and to respond to needs that maybe are very niche or for a very short-term period. All of those things are important.

We can't be over-prescriptive on what they have to learn, how they have to learn, and what are the learning outcomes they have to achieve. Some of that is important but it's

also important to trust learners more that they can make decisions for themselves.

When you're a child, an awful lot of the stuff you learn is undirected. You do it if you get fun out of it. The things we learn and why we learn them give us a lot of meaning in our lives.

There's no question about it, people who are excited about learning learn more, they have more fulfilling lives, their health is better, their mental health is better, they live longer, all the outcomes are better for them. Learning in itself is of intrinsic value to the individual and the wider community. Everybody benefits from it.

Another big challenge for us is we have to pick up on the people who have least opportunities for learning. People who have poor opportunities at primary and second-level education, they're the same ones who are left out when it comes to lifelong learning and adult education. Very often it's the jobs that people do stop them because they have lack of security, or shift times keep changing, or they're involved in physical work away from home.

That's something Lyndsey's working on, entry points [into ACE] and exit points out of it. These are critically important. If you're a single mother with three children under the age of 10, you're not going to get a whole lot of time for lifelong learning now but down the line, you'll have more time. We

have to make [these opportunities] real for people.

Lyndsey: It's flexibility that will unlock that. Sometimes, unknowingly, higher education puts barriers in the way of learners. Part of our mission in ACE is trying to break down those barriers.

We're working on projects around recognition of prior learning to help people come through, recognising their experiential learning, not just saying you don't have an academic qualification, you're not welcome here.

"... ACE will continue to be responsive to community need and say, what is it the world wants from us now?"

We want learners who are eager to learn, we want to facilitate them, no matter what their background is. We want people to come to ACE and for us to be able to say to them, 'Okay, you can't get to the top of the ladder right away but here's a pathway to get to where you want to be.'

Another project we're working on are things like micro-credentials that will help learners to dip a toe in and do something short. So that woman who Séamus is talking about with three young children, she might be able to sign up for an eight-week micro-credential certificate that will help her in her



their English is quite poor but they might be a medical doctor. We come to them and say you can't get into one of our Level 6 courses because your English isn't good enough. Well, that's not good enough from our point of view. There's something wrong with that.

Likewise, people may have poor literacy skills. We have this idea in our head, you go to primary school and you learn how to read and write, and then you move along. Well, you can learn an awful lot without being able to read and write. There were an awful lot of very clever people on planet earth for a huge amount of human history who couldn't read or write at all.

Lyndsey: And we'll continue to do research to contribute to that broader international discussion.

Séamus: Sometimes we're doing the best in the world. Irish people are not conditioned to think in those terms very often. We say they must be doing it better in Sweden or Germany but sometimes they come to us and say wow, that's interesting.

Lyndsey: Thinking about ACE into the future, three words sum it up. We want to be bigger – have more courses, more students. We want to be broad-

er – in terms of giving access to higher education to more marginalised groups, engaging with more partners, engaging with more of our peers internationally on the research agenda. And then to be bolder – to continue to be innovative, push that flexibility, come up with novel ways of delivering to our students and novel programmes, and try to keep at the cutting edge all the time.

It's no easy feat but we've survived the last 75 years; hopefully the next 75 will be the same.

Stephen: What's the biggest difference between the students of ACE 75 years ago and ACE today?

Séamus: In 1946, if you graduated with an engineering degree it was presumed you were an engineer and you were trained for life. The students who are going to graduate from UCC in 2021, there's no single area where their careers and their futures are not going to demand them to engage in lifelong learning multiple times.

That's going to be the challenge for the entire university system, the realisation that it's no longer the case that somebody starts in primary school or kindergarten, they go through a process, they come out with a degree, and

they're done and dusted.

When you say that to people, they very often see it as a dystopian scenario: Oh my God, I'm never going to get out of school? There's a challenge here for us to start thinking about learning in a different way.

Learning is fun and unless it's fun we're not really going to engage in it. Instead of presenting to people some dystopian future saying you're never going to get out of school, you're here for life, just say you're going to have so many chances here at new things and different things, to expand your mind, to enrich your life, to meet new people, expose yourself to a whole set of new experiences and opportunities for the rest of your life.

Lyndsey: One of my favourite quotes ever was from Albert Einstein: Once you stop learning you start dying.

Séamus: [Bertolt] Brecht said something like: You can always restart even in your last breath.

People with really advanced stages of Alzheimer's can learn a lot. I remember my own mother learning to paint. The only thing she'd ever painted was the door or the gates but she started creating art and it was important for her. She enjoyed doing it.

Springboard to success: *'The best investment you can make is in yourself'*

With 700,000 of the Irish workforce finding themselves unemployed at the peak of the Covid pandemic, opportunities for upskilling and retraining are more vital than ever.

Poppy Breheny, Ian Temple, and David Relihan found themselves among that quarter of the Irish working population out of a job during the past year.

While they come from different backgrounds, in HR, teaching, and facilities maintenance, each turned to a Springboard+ subsidised course at UCC to boost their job search.

Targeted at those unemployed or in precarious employment, Springboard+ courses are free for job-seekers and returners to education, while those in

employment receive a 90% fee subsidy. With a strong industry focus and dedicated support for adult learners, the courses are as highly rated by graduates as those graduates are sought-after by employers.

Over 300 students took on a dozen courses in the past year, with 96% of students retained amid the challenges of Covid and the transition to online learning.

"A year ago, I would never have thought I'd be doing it," says Poppy, a student on the Postgraduate Diploma in Digital Arts and Humanities.

The Blackpool-resident had graduated from Early Years and Childhood Studies and a Higher Diploma in Psychology at UCC

before working in business, education, and, last March, being offered a HR role with a large multinational company.

She describes it as a "fantastic opportunity" until the pandemic shut down much of the economy and she lost her job.

"I had two options, settle for a jobs market that wasn't really there at the time, or upskill. I was sitting down for days and days, saying what do I do with my life?"

"I just remembered what Warren Buffett said: 'The best investment you can make is in yourself'. So I chose the latter, upskill and keep moving forward."

Ian, from Dublin, was due to

That's the challenge to say this is fun. It's not an imposition on you. These are opportunities. A lot of people have had really negative experiences in the education system and then they say never again, not for me. We need to really reach out to those people and say you can have fun in this space.

A part of that is linking up with other educational providers. They might be in ACE at UCC today but they might be in the ETB [Education and Training Board] tomorrow or some private education provider or learning to swim. It's all learning.

Stephen: It's hard to predict what demands you'll be responding to in future courses but having more points of entry for more people from more different backgrounds seems to be very consistent in all



David Relihan.

start work at Maynooth University as an English for academic purposes teacher and student coordinator.

"There were three jobs I was about to start and then they collapsed all at once. The most

of it... Is there anything else you'd like to sum up on?

Lyndsey: In all of ACE's history over the last 75 years, people have been key. ACE itself is just a collection of like-minded people who want to make a difference in the world and are committed to the mission of lifelong learning. That's what sustains ACE, that's what helped ACE expand, and that's what's going to be the difference for the next 75 years. It all comes back to people.

Séamus: And interestingly, a lot of the people who work in ACE have had untraditional routes through education as well. A lot of them actually came through ACE itself so they understand the value of it more than most people do because they've had to work harder for it themselves. That makes a difference.

Recession

A political science graduate in the middle of the last financial crisis, he had taken jobs where he could or travelled abroad for work, but with so much of the economy shut down and travel restrictions in place this time around, he turned to UCC's Higher Diploma in Advanced Languages and Global Communication.

"That's the lesson from the recession. Educate yourself through a recession, that was the advice I got out of college because I finished college in 2009.

"It was quite hard to contemplate. What are you going to do you? What kind of plan have you? That's why I jumped straight into this Springboard+ course. If you don't throw an extra line onto your CV, people will wonder what you were doing."

For David, a former Debenhams employee who previ-



ously spent a decade working in carpentry, getting accepted onto the Certificate in Operator Development (Pharma Manufacturing) came at just the right moment.

"It's a great course. It was something I needed at the time. Back in September, I was saying, 'Jeez, what am I letting myself in for?', but Lorna [Moloney, UCC Springboard Coordinator] has been very reassuring, as everyone else has.

"Of course, it's challenging. Going back to education can get a bit daunting for someone of my age but all the help anyone would want is there. You just have to reach out for it."

The Castletownroche-native has been studying modules in personal and technical effectiveness and at all times through his first experience of college, he says the supports have been there, including those at home from his wife, Emma, his son, Jack, and his parents.

"It's been a while since I've been in school but all the resources are there. You've got your virtual recruitment fairs set up for you, any help you need is there for doing your CV, the Skills Centre is there for any assignments you might need help with, like how to write essays and reference. And even my fellow students are always on the other side of the phone to help.

"We're going into our second module now and I find it fantastic. It's great to be looking forward to it."

Poppy describes her course as "a broad mix of brilliance", developing students' creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration through a mix of classwork and assessment. Students have had opportunities to gain experience creating websites and engaging with contemporary debates, such as critiquing best practices for data protection.

"You might have three assignments for one module and there could be an interactive side to it, there could be a creative side to it, there could be an essay side to it, so it's completely varied and it means everyone gets a chance to show where their strengths are and maybe learn a new area.

"They're really encouraging to just present it how you want to as well. It's lovely to have the options."

There have been a variety of stresses for Ian to deal with studying from home and avoiding the Covid brain fog, as well as dealing with the worry when his father got the virus – he has fully recovered since.

But he uses the phrase "like a dream" twice, to describe his

Campus style:

Ian Temple has yet to get the opportunity to visit UCC but did win a UCC hoodie (left)



Poppy Breheny

dealings with UCC coordinator Lorna and his Japanese classes, and once his work placement is sorted and travel is permitted again, he's considering moving to Córdoba in Spain.

Stepping into the unknown

For David, the impact of the course on his career change hasn't had to wait. In January, he started work as a manufacturing team member with a medical device company.

"I'm enjoying that. Definitely being on the course helped with my application.

"I was very lucky. I'm still on the course and it can be it challenging at times but it's definitely helped with my progression getting back into the workforce.

"Springboard+ and UCC are fantastic, they've been very accommodating. It was a case of stepping into the unknown for someone like myself but as hard as you think it is, you should go and do it if it's something you want to pursue or you just feel like there's something missing, that you wanted to go back and do your education."

As for Poppy, she's staying fo-

cused on adding to her growing skill set and spreading positivity in a turbulent year.

"I'd recommend the course to anyone. I'd describe the experience for me as a journey, this year especially.

"It's been a full year, I've been given a fantastic opportunity to upskill myself in the worst possible time, and I'm healthy and staying hopeful.

"There's so much negativity out there, why keep adding to it? Just look on the bright side and collaboration gets you through it, so it's great to be able to practice that this year, even if I am in my kitchen!

"We don't know our futures anymore, and I don't think you should think of that as a bad thing. Think of it more in an open-minded sense. There are possibilities out there for everyone. Everyone has individual passions and the options are out there, and if they're not they can be created as well.

"Just keep positive, keep hopeful, and whatever happens happens. Hopefully, it's for the best and it could change your life for good. Nothing lasts forever so just keep moving forward."

Record numbers sign up for short courses to combat Covid boredom

The search for a new pastime during the spring lockdown saw a surge in the number of people taking a short course with ACE at UCC.

As courses moved online, they found added significance in combatting boredom and social isolation, with close to 700 students registering for the spring offering of 34 courses. That was up by almost 250 from the usual spring figures for the courses which run for six, eight, or ten weeks.

It included students from beyond the usual Munster audience in Ireland, across Europe, and further afield in America. Among those who wouldn't have been able to attend in the classroom setting included an Irish couple on a yacht in Portugal, who took Wine Studies, one of nine courses to be fully subscribed this spring.

While the autumn/winter calendar will be finalised in July, short course co-ordinator Regina Sexton can rely on a loyal cohort of students who return every spring and autumn, as well as those who dip in and out of specific subjects of interest, with the slate of courses usually split between perennial favourites and new courses.

"People were looking for things to do because their lives have become so much smaller and the world has become so much smaller and the short courses provided that outlet for them," says Regina of the increased student numbers.

"We had record numbers and we're running more courses than we've ever run, so it's all been a success story really."

"The other dimension to this is a lot of the short course students would be an older generation so we were very apprehensive as to how they would take to an online virtual environment but people are very adaptable and it's working out."

A search for identity was perhaps evident in the success of the courses in Myth and Magic: An Introduction to the Study of Irish Folklore and Mythology, as well as Mapping Our Place: Insights and Skills for Mapping Our Heritage, and the ever-popular Research and Write your Family Tree.

The courses are always respon-

sive to societal issues, with Childhood Trauma: Consequences and Essential Responses fully subscribed, while courses on Gender Identity in Ireland: Perceptions and Practice, and Towards a New Social Empathy: Disability and Daily Living in the Context of Covid-19 were also offered.

Permaculture: Design for Sustainable and Healthy Living was another to see places snapped up, with other important matters covered in The Challenge of the Climate Emergency to Global Politics in the 21st Century, and Thinking like the Mountain: Developing a Deeper Understanding of Ecology and Environmentalism.

Introductory courses in Creative Writing and Psychology were both fully booked, while Confident Communication is an annual favourite. Courses cover a range of disciplines, from a variety of topics across history, literature, and art history, including the popular How to Read Art, to introductions in subjects as varied as Coaching Skills, Criminal Psychology, Marine Biology, Nutrition, Philosophy, and, of course, those Wine Studies students in Portugal and at home.

"We didn't know how the Wine Studies course was going to go because it usually has tastings in the class. We've adapted that so the students get a list of wines to buy and then because you don't want to be at home on your own drinking a bottle of wine doing the course, they're welcome to bring their friends or their partner so we've widened it out."

Whatever the course, the challenge of the past year has been to not just create a learning environment but a social one for students.

"The other attraction to those humanities-based courses is coming together in a social context. A lot of those courses would be in the mornings, a lot would be outreach in the city libraries, art galleries, like the Crawford Art Gallery, or Nano Nagle Centre.

"Going to the course was much more than a cognitive exercise. It was a social occasion where people could meet people, they could make friends, they could have coffee, they could go for lunch. There were all these so-



The range and number of UCC ACE short courses has grown steadily from 2005. The 2020/21 academic year saw a record-breaking number of student enrolments.

cial connections that satelited around the learning aspects of the short course.

"Unfortunately, there's only so much you can take from that to a virtual environment but we try to replicate that as best we can and people saw it as a vehicle for coming together to have that human contact, especially when the nights were long and the

weather was bad."

The regulars, in particular, build up a network of friends who move together from one course to another each spring and autumn.

"They love them, they really enjoy the new aspects of the programme. We build that element of expectation and anticipation

for them to look forward to the new programme as they come together again.

"It isn't just the course they do for six weeks and that's the end of it. There's a continuum and there's a consistency and they build up a group of friends within that context, and they love that. They love it."

The story of Irish people's complex relationship with food

Regina Sexton is also co-ordinator of the Postgraduate Diploma in Irish Food Culture as part of her work as a renowned food and culinary historian.

A first of its kind for Ireland, the inaugural class of 11 students are finishing the two-year programme this May.

"I've seen a lot of things happening to Irish food over that 25-to-30-year period working in the area," says Regina.

"I saw a lot of unreliable or unsafe information circulating, particularly in the areas of food heritage, nutrition and health, sustainability, food in the environment, and so on.

"It's a course that is transdisciplinary and takes in the expertise of UCC staff across different colleges, from BEES

(Biological, Earth, and Environmental Sciences) to Food Science, and things like food history, food geography, food and folklore, food and literature, food and sustainability, food and nutrition, but always rooted to an Irish context."

The students come from different food backgrounds, including producers, tourism operators, writers, and marketers, but all seeking the insights and academic grounding to apply to their own work.

"If you look in terms of how food is marketed and how people are thinking about food at the moment, it would be in some quarters a counter-movement, counter-globalisation, counter-big business, big food, food industry.

"In a shopping context and in

a marketing and a tourism context, food is traded on what they call the 'food story' but it's how you develop that story is the issue. You either develop it in a sound way or in a suspect way.

"That's what the course is trying to do, trying to equip students with the information and the ways of thinking that allow them to think about the story of Irish food from a sound information and sound academic springboard."

The rapid changes in the Irish attitude to food can be dated back to The Great Famine and accelerated after Ireland joined the European Union in 1973. That transition from local food producers to food consumers in a global supply chain has seen supermarkets become largely homogenised and the loss of many regional variations.

Leading the way in the battle against racism and inequality

You can't be what you can't see.

When Dr Sindy Joyce stands in front of her class for the Diploma in Leadership in the Community, she's not just another lecturer to that group of 21 Traveller women.

Sindy, a human rights activist and member of President Michael D Higgins' Council of State, became the first person from the Traveller community to graduate with a PhD from an Irish university in 2019. Her doctoral thesis, completed through UL's Sociology Department, examined how young Travellers' experiences in urban space are shaped by their ethnicity and anti-Traveller racism.

Sindy's achievements aren't to say that the system of education in Ireland has been working for the Traveller community. Quite the opposite. Only 13% of Travellers have completed secondary education, compared to 92% of the general population.

On the day of Sindy's graduation, she spoke of her "mixed emotions", pride at breaking that glass ceiling, and sadness that it had taken so long.

Her journey through education

was difficult. She experienced exclusion and marginalisation like members of the Traveller community across the country. Anne Burke, who coordinates the course, told this paper last year: "Travellers survived through the education system".

This course, therefore, is an attempt to right some of those wrongs; to provide some of the opportunities that should've been provided long ago. It is designed by the Traveller community to run in a way that actually works for the Traveller community.

"I thought it was a really good initiative," says Sindy of that first approach to lecture on the course. "I thought it was important for the women to be involved and I thought it was important that it would be a member of their own community teaching them.

"Particularly that module around human rights and the Traveller community, and the racism and ethnicity around that. It didn't take me long to think about it."

For many on the course, this will represent a first positive experience of mainstream education.

"I got a really good reaction



Dr Sindy Joyce celebrates graduating from her PhD with her parents, Edward and Mary, at UL in 2019. Her doctoral thesis examined how young Travellers' experiences in urban space are shaped by their ethnicity and anti-Traveller racism. Picture: Sean Curtin, True Media

from the students and they were really engaged, really interested. A lot of the things I was teaching, they were never taught it in school.

"They mentioned quite a few times how it was important to have a member of the community to explain it. They felt a bit more comfortable to ask me questions that they may not have asked another lecturer if they weren't from the community be-

cause of the lack of confidence due to their past experiences of being treated as different and being excluded within the school system.

"That was a really positive aspect for them, that they really got involved, really hands-on, and really engaged. They did fantastic work. They were doing great in their assignments and their discussions."

Sindy's own education journey

was in many ways no different to those in her class.

"I've experienced exclusion and marginalisation in the education system myself. It was a difficult journey but I went on and did my degree as a mature student, and then I did my master's degree and continued on to do my PhD.

"That was important for the women to see that someone from their community went through the whole education system, got through it, and is now teaching them. As the saying goes, you can't be what you can see.

"It's important to be able to see somebody like you in a position like that. That gives them the confidence that they could also do it."

The course examined marginalised groups across the world that have suffered similar experiences to the Traveller community, such as the Roma and Sámi people, as well as national and international legislation, including the 1989 Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act and the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

With such a focus on discussion and group work, the online classes proved difficult to manage and took a break until returning to the classroom was possible.

Open season

Covid has hit the Traveller community harder than the general population. Over 10% have had



Food and culinary historian Regina Sexton (right) and Fern Allen examining Myrtle Allen's archives at Ballymaloe House. The Myrtle Allen Archive was bequeathed to UCC in May 2019, which coincided with the launch of the Postgraduate Diploma in Irish Food Culture.

"All of us have a food opinion depending on how we build our relationship with food, be it carnivore or omnivore or vegan or paleo.

"Food is a very strong fashion accessory at the moment but

we still have this confusing and complex relationship with food at the same time. That's what makes the course really interesting because we can discuss and pull all those things apart in an Irish context, and Ireland is still very much an agricultural

country – the largest indigenous industry.

"The course is essentially a study of people and their relationship with food. People tend to think it's all about recipes and gastronomy. It's not, it's much broader than that."

the virus in a community that already has one of the lowest life expectancies of any social group – with 3% living beyond the age of 65 (compared to a national average of 19% across the general population).

As President Higgins noted in a recent address, approximately 3,000 Travellers live on sites, often overcrowded, without access to running water, electricity, and toilets, making self-isolation and hand-washing so much more difficult.

There has also been an increased prevalence of racism noted by Sindy during the pandemic.

“If you just go online, it seems to be open season on Travellers at the moment in Irish society, with every sort of racism, discrimination, and hate comments being plastered all over social media.

“The next topic we’ll be focusing on will be looking at the mental health aspect and the suicide rates which are seven times higher for the Traveller community than the general community and looking at how mental health is affected through Covid.

“All the issues interconnect with one another. You can’t teach health without teaching about the exclusion around healthcare but also about the accommodation issues which affect health and education.

“Some of the community are still living without access to water and sanitary services in the middle of a pandemic.”

The power of the course, therefore, comes in equipping the students to help lead in their communities and represent their needs in the face of such glaring inequalities.

“It’s providing them with the tools to be able to go into their local authority and discuss the issues affecting their community and show the council their duty to provide access to basic human rights.

“Water is a human right and this provides the community with all those tools to go out and advocate and lobby for their community.

“But also, if a member of their community experienced a hate crime, for example, that they would have the tools to help that person or family with where to go, how to report it, and what would the next steps be.

“It’s providing them with all those tools, the legislation, the rules, the duties on the local authorities, what they should be doing, and the laws around that, so they have all the tools available to be leaders in their community and to help their community in areas around accommodation, health, hate crimes, and racism.”

Donal Feen feels a sense of duty to spread the word about his education journey and his time with ACE at UCC. Not because he was asked to, but because if people didn’t point him in the right direction, he wouldn’t be where he is now.

Donal was going up the escalator in Debenhams one day when he met a woman from his hometown of Cobh. She had finished her degree in UCC and after some chat and congratulations about that achievement, she said, ‘Donal, you’ll end up in UCC yet... you ought to try ACE’.

‘Never in my lifetime will that happen to me,’ he replied, and he truly believed those words.

He never thought the day would come but a few tentative enquiries later and next thing, he was there. He was there collecting his student card and getting a feel for life on campus. That first day, he popped into the Boole Library, just for 10 minutes, and then went over to the restaurant. He had, in his own words, a fine dinner and said to himself, ‘You know what, I’ve arrived’.

“If you said to me two or three years ago that I would be in UCC, not in my dreams,” says Donal. “And if the girl up in Debenhams didn’t say to me, ‘Donal, you ought to try



Donal Feen at home in Cobh with his Certificate in Mental Health in the Community after UCC’s virtual conferring ceremony last November.

ACE’... I didn’t know what ACE was, never heard of it in my life. But she passed the word on to me.

“And I met someone recently I would’ve come across about two years ago and she’s doing a degree in UCC now the last

Word of mouth: ‘Not in my wildest dreams did I see myself in UCC’

two years because she heard me saying that I’d gone back to school.”

So while the escalators in Debenhams may not run anymore, and chance meetings have been put on hold by the Covid-19 pandemic, that word of mouth continues to spread and improve the prospects of those who hear it.

ACE wasn’t the first point of contact for Donal’s return to education almost four decades since dropping out of school at a young age. He went on to spend 34 years with the Department of Defence civilian section working at Haulbowline until his early retirement in 2012.

“When I retired, I’d a brilliant reference but I’d no qualification, no Junior Cert, no Inter Cert, no Group Cert, nothing. It was a void really. I started from scratch at 57 and every year I’ve been involved in study on some course or another. And every college and establishment was very encouraging.”

He started off in the Altrusa Literacy Scheme on Douglas Street, working one-to-one for eight months on areas he struggled with academically, like English grammar. From there, he

was guided towards Youthreach on Dean Street, where he took eight subjects and found the system of continuous learning suited his mind.

That opened the door to the College of Commerce, where he did courses on computer skills, counselling skills, and substance use issues in youth and community work. It was there the opportunity of going to UCC was raised.

“I remember looking at a chart in Youthreach and I was at the bottom, down at Level 1, and I never thought for one minute that I’d ever go to Level 4 or 5, and go above the Leaving Cert, up to Level 6.”

He took up the Certificate in Mental Health in the Community, a course that provides a uniquely safe space for those who study it, bringing together, as it tends to do, a mixture of those with personal experiences of mental health issues, people with family members who’ve died by suicide, and those working and volunteering in the sector.

Many of the lecturers, too, have lived experience of mental health difficulties and personal recovery, combining the aca-

demic and the practical in the classroom. “Every lecturer was very open and there was a lot of honesty there, kept in the room, but they weren’t afraid to tell us a bit about themselves either.”

When graduation plans were disrupted by Covid, Donal and his classmates were able to graduate via a live-streamed ceremony last November. In his graduation gown, Donal was joined at home by his two children, who inspired him with their own degrees and career paths, and grandchildren, and while the lecturers could not be there to congratulate them, there was still, and remains, contact.

“I was able to email them the pictures and they were thrilled. An awful lot of support, and they’d say, ‘we might see you next year’, or ‘let us know how you’re doing’.

“Good support, good follow-up. You weren’t just dropped away, ‘oh, this is it now, good luck’.

“They were brilliant, totally different to what I would’ve expected, not because I didn’t expect anything but because I didn’t know what to expect.

“Everyone, from the girl answering the phone to the security guard standing at the library,

they couldn’t be helpful enough. Every one of them was just perfect and I’ll tell you now, I will go back.

“It was a great experience. You can see why it is so successful. But it was something beyond my wildest dreams that I would end up in there.”

A new outlook on life

Where once there was a void is now a growing surplus. He speaks over the phone with 14 certificates scattered across the table in front of him, and no plans to stop.

The Wellness Recovery Action Plan programme is his next aim, while he continues volunteering in Cobh Youth Services as he has done over the past three years.

“I chipped away at it one course at a time. And sometimes I struggled with it. When you start going into Level 5 and 6, it’s a big step up. The word UCC, you’d be afraid of it.

“But once you got in the door, the lecturers, everyone, they were so helpful. I emailed them all when I finished and I thanked them for the courtesy they had.

“There was no age barrier with

education. People were just delighted to go back. The attraction was everyone inside there wanted to be there. And we didn’t realise the skills we had outside of not having the education on paper.

“My learning journey has given me a new outlook on life and it gives you skills for a rewarding career because it allows me now to go into an area, the youth and community sector, and that’s where my interests lie.

“It gives you a lot more confidence. And it gives me a choice of work now, that I can produce a UCC Level 6 cert whereas I couldn’t before.”

It’s funny, he remarks, that day one on his education journey he was told, ‘Donal, you’re going to end up working with kids’. The default response was returned, ‘That’ll never happen’.

But unbeknown to him, he had many of the skills all along. The likes of teamwork and outside-the-box thinking, honed in his previous career and through life in general, rather than picked up in a classroom. The bit of paper was proof, as much as anything, of how much he has to contribute.

Meet the American priest ‘dazzled’ by Ireland’s transformation from theocracy to marriage equality

Reverend Chris Ballard of Trinity-St John’s Episcopal Church, New York. (inset)

tion of UCC.

Chris’s husband is a publicist for Disney and it was on a book tour with Rick Riordan that the *Percy Jackson* author revealed he was studying UCC’s Online Master’s in Gaelic Literature.

“Then, pandemic time happened,” says Chris, “and it was like, what am I gonna do for the foreseeable future? And that’s how I came to UCC.”

Chris displays a bona fide knowledge of Ireland throughout the conversation, referencing events from the Great Famine to the Good Friday Agreement, the Eas-

ter Rising, Irish Free State, and Civil War, and recent referendums on marriage equality and the repeal of the Eighth Amendment.

It’s no surprise from a man who achieved a graduate degree on American expansionism in world history from Iowa State University and taught the subject before he was called to the priesthood. That said, Chris didn’t know much beyond the Irish stereotypes in America until recent events led him to seek a deeper understanding of Ireland and its changing culture.

“It fits into my interest about Ireland and the lightning speed with which the culture has changed in the last 20 years. For

someone who’s sitting on this side of the Atlantic, I find it fascinating to watch your culture completely transform itself, especially sitting in a culture that feels very regressive right now.

“Prior to the Good Friday accords, my understanding of Ireland was, I’ll just be straight up honest, black and white grainy footage of bombs going off, of horrible theocratic rule of people who were just downtrodden by guilt and shame by a church, and alcoholism, which is not fair.

“That was my image and then, all of a sudden, you have an American president in my time entering into a conflict [The Troubles] that I’ve known my

entire life, that was religious but also political. So you have this president coming into a culture and, of course, the culture wanting peace. It was an imperfect agreement – I get it – but it was this hammering at it that started this interest.

“And, of course, I’m gay and marriage equality really stoked that interest a lot. My mouth dropped open when it happened because I’m still carrying with me this bigoted misinformation about a culture that isn’t fair anymore.

“That legacy was still very much with me, which accounted for the jaw dropping. 66% accepted marriage equality and I’m thinking, okay, I want to know more

about this place. These people, who I have a distant relationship to, I want to know more about this.

“Then, of course, the repeal of the Eighth was... I mean I’m living in the United States where abortion is the thing and it’s politicised but I looked at the margins and where people were voting and how they were voting and I just thought, I want to understand it as much as I can because I, quite frankly, am dazzled.”

Chris has Irish ancestry – his great-great-grandfather emigrated from Ulster in the 1840s – and he has relatives who are Kellys, Keegans, and Sheedys but he doesn’t partake in the “odd Irish ancestry worship”, preferring to engage with Ireland as it is today rather than that stereotyped version of Irishness.

He did take Irish language classes at New York’s Molloy College before the pandemic arrived and caused the turn to UCC’s short courses for something academically challenging but without the demands of essays and exams.

Since spring 2020, he has taken courses on early Celtic history, Irish folklore and mythology, Ireland during the First World War, and gender identity in Ireland.

“One of the first courses I got was one that met at 10 o’clock in the morning, your time, which means it met at about 5am my time. ‘Oh, I can do it,’ but there was no way at 5am,” Chris laughs.

“I downloaded all the lectures so it wasn’t a complete wash-out and I loved it but there was no amount of caffeine that was gonna keep me awake for any

type of sitting in a lecture. And it was a great class, do not get me wrong, the problem was me!”

He is full of praise for Jenny Butler’s Myth and Magic course – “it was super interesting, so much so that I bought a fairy door for one of my trees because I took the class,” he says with another laugh – and “the wonderful John Ware” for his perspective of Ireland on the eve of its revolution during World War One.

He adds: “The one I’ve fallen in love with was Sara-Jane Cromwell’s gender identity class on trans issues in Ireland. I’ll probably take another one from her, only because I think she’s so compelling and so interesting.

“Of course, Sara-Jane is a trans woman so her understanding and her journey in this was really remarkable. It was also re-

markable, as a student of Ireland and contemporary Irish culture, how old Ireland, for the lack of a better word, the theocratic Ireland manifested in her own life and how it currently is manifesting. From a cultural perspective that was super interesting.”

New frontier

The experience of remote learning is one mirrored by the move to remote worship in his Episcopal Church.

“What’s really remarkable is you can get your laptop, go where you need to go, sit where you need to sit, have the drink of your choice with you, and you can open up your world in a really interesting way.

“That’s what’s really great about UCC. I get a real feeling that this is the new frontier for this programme and UCC is highly sensitive to that.

“For me, this has been a lifeline of real significance. I’m really grateful to this programme. My interests aside, on a human level, to be able to have been engaging with people who have a different perspective and learning something together, it got me out of my kitchen and out of this part of New York in a smart, healthy way.

“I really deeply appreciate the programme for doing that.”

Despite the challenge of the different dialects, he will continue studying Irish – “a very spiritual language, just beginning with *Dia duit*” – and he’ll return, remotely, to UCC this autumn – “I’m going to take two courses, and I’ll continue to do so.”

And having had plans for an awesome trip to Ireland lost to Covid, he’ll be back at the next possible opportunity, *le cúnamh Dé*.



For Reverend Chris Ballard, taking short courses through ACE at UCC was a means of getting to know more about Irish culture as well as giving him “a lifeline of real significance” during the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic in New York.

What’s more, it was a #1 *New York Times* bestselling author who pointed Chris in the direc-

A national treasure returns home: *Bringing the Book of Lismore to the people*

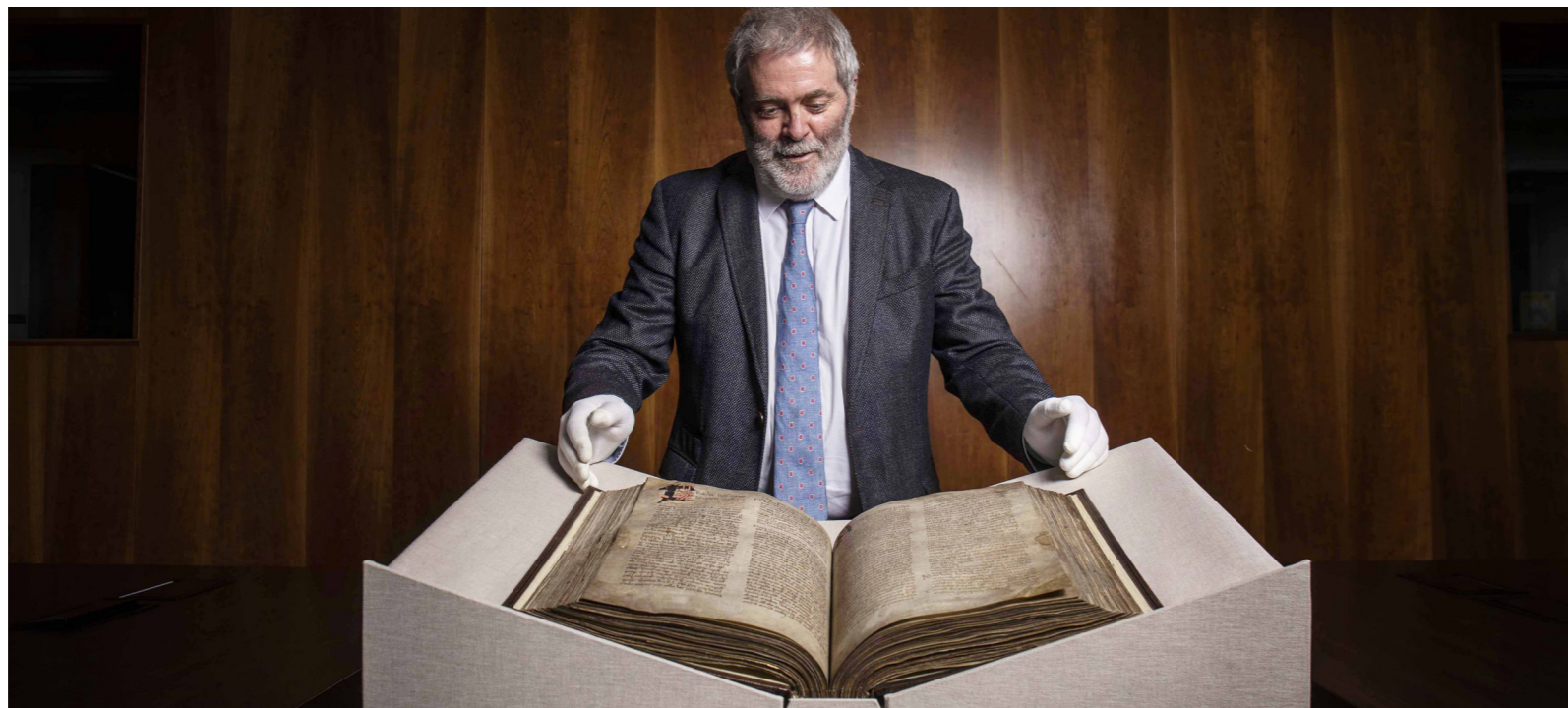
In future years, the Book of Lismore will get a fitting setting for its public display – a Treasures Gallery at its new, permanent home in UCC’s Boole Library.

The ancient Gaelic manuscript’s arrival last October was a moment of national significance and an unusual event; the repatriation of one of Ireland’s outstanding national treasures from a golden age of literary production.

It’s a book that has taken many detours on its journey over the past five centuries, from its creation at Kilbrittain Castle around 1480, with contributions from the Franciscan friary at nearby Timoleague, for Finghin Mac Carthaigh Riabhach, Lord of Carbery, and his wife Caitilín.

It was confiscated in 1642 during the Irish Confederate Wars but rediscovered, alongside the Lismore Crozier, in a blocked-up doorway during renovations at Lismore Castle in 1814. The book remained with the Cavendish family, Dukes of Devonshire, from this time, at Lismore until 1914 and then at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, England.

The rare nature of its repatriation can be explained by the special relationship the family has maintained with Cork and UCC. The book was loaned to



Professor of Modern Irish Pádraig Ó Macháin pictured with The Book of Lismore after its donation to UCC by the Trustees of the Chatsworth Settlement. The medieval manuscript, created at Kilbrittain Castle in a golden age of Irish literature, is considered one of the great books of Ireland. Picture: Clare Keogh

Cork for seven years shortly after its rediscovery and returned to the city two centuries later, in 2011, for an exhibition at UCC, an institution the family donated land to in its early years.

Now permanently back in its country and county of origin thanks to its donation by the Trustees of the Chatsworth Settlement, the book will enjoy a new lease of life. And even while Covid delayed all possibilities for an in-person gather-

ing fitting of the occasion, the University has taken the book to the public through its online platforms.

As it was remarked by UCC librarian John Fitzgerald upon the book’s arrival, while its cover carries its dual title, “Book of Mac Carthy Reagh, commonly called The Book of Lismore”, it’s also the book of all those who wrote, bound, preserved, and ensured its survival over the centuries.

“It’s also the Book of Kilbrittain, the Book of Timoleague, the Book of Cork, and the Book of Chatsworth, and it’s also now the Book of University College Cork. And as the Book of University College Cork, it belongs to everybody, all of those people and places that it passed through for the last 500 years.”

Great pride

One of the first steps to allow enthusiasts to virtually pour

through its pages came in the form of an ACE short course, The Book of Lismore and the Gaelic Manuscript, which ran across six weeks in February and March.

The course itself was oversubscribed, with 45 students snapping up places, and while six weeks can only cover so much of the book’s rich contents, its history, how it was produced, and its wider significance, course coordinator Professor

Pádraig Ó Macháin says it gives a good grounding with input from world-renowned experts.

“It’s been a great success. I’m always delighted to be able to interact with people who have an interest. You might have somebody from the locality where the book was written and it’s a matter of great pride to them, and so it should be,” says Pádraig, a Professor of Modern Irish at UCC.

“Every manuscript is unique but you can see how this was intended from the get-go to be a significant piece of work and something that will be treasured by the person for whom it was written. As it is treasured by us today, so there’s a continuity in that regard.”

The course included a lecture from Pádraig on ‘A book of miracles and wonders: the contents of the Book of Lismore’, as well as contributions on the book’s accounts of Marco Polo’s travels and the traditions of Fionn mac Cumhaill from Andrea Palandri and Síle Ní Mhurchú.

John Gillis, who led the remarkable restoration of the 1,200-year-old Faddan More Psalter from a lump of wet turf, spoke about the making of Gaelic manuscripts, and Timothy O’Neill, a calligrapher who has worked on projects as diverse as the British Airways ‘Celtic style’ tailfin and as a hand double for writing close-ups in films, lectured on the history of Gaelic script.

John Fitzgerald and Crónán Ó

Doibhlin, meanwhile, told of the book’s historical links to Cork and its 21st-century significance.

Handmade and handwritten, the book is remarkably well planned and executed from its religious tales on the lives of saints, through to secular passages on native sagas and kingship, and ending with stories written purely for entertainment.

One of around 400 manuscripts surviving from the vellum period, the 400 pages were produced from 200 calf skins. In a pre-urban, tribal Ireland, everything was locally sourced but the book also reveals a people opening up to European cultural influences.

“It’s like someone went out and embraced every aspect of Irish tradition and European tradition at the time and organized it in a systematic way within the layout of the book,” says Pádraig.

Those who created the book were in the upper echelons of a hierarchical, feudal system, who had the luxury of literary activities.

“People who could actually read and write any sort of language were very few. Literacy was the preserve of an elite. So what you’re looking at with the Book of Lismore is a product of that elite class.

“Famine and want were a regular thing among the poorer classes. When we talk about the Great Famine, it’s called the great one because there were many, many



lesser famines, more localised famines. War and violent death were commonplace.

“So you have this oasis of learning represented by our written artefacts that represent the top of the food chain activity which was literacy and the cultivation of letters.”

Status quo

The Book of Lismore also represents a golden age of Gaelic manuscripts before the collapse of the tribes.

“While we may not have had universities in Ireland, we had centres of learning that were sponsored and cultivated by the local lords and run on a hereditary basis from father to son and onwards by certain families.

“Without the structure of sponsorship, you wouldn’t have any of these books. That is why everything changed so dramatically when the Elizabethan conquest and policy of plantation was pursued in the late 16th century and early 17th century.

“So the Book of Lismore came to represent so many different things. It represents the status quo before the changes that reform and conquest brought. It represents Irish tradition. It represents this elite practice of the cultivation of learning and the making of books.

“And the civilization epitomised by these manuscripts was, in many respects, in contrast to the realities of life lower down the food chain that persisted to the end of the 19th

century.”

As the study and understanding of the book deepens through further research, there are plans to develop academic modules based exclusively on the Book of Lismore.

“It’s important the book is made available to the public because it’s a national treasure. And there are so many possibilities, because of the variety of its contents, with regard to what you can exhibit as explanatory material to accompany the book itself.”

Just as the Book of Lismore has entertained and informed through the centuries, it will now provide something to look forward to in a post-Covid era.



‘She believed she could, so she did’

Opportunity knocks: “The doors will open. Education is never for nothing. It will always lead to something else,” says Ballyhoura development officer Laura Moloney McCarthy (inset)

ect, doors just seemed to keep opening the more I was going forward with the course, and before I even had the course finished, I had got to my end goal. Before I’d my grades back I knew, this is it, I’m now a development officer and I’m based in Mitchelstown.

“I couldn’t have asked for anything better out of the course. It did what it was meant to do,” she says with a chuckle.

The journey from there to here took a few diversions along the way but fuelled by “sheer stubbornness and coffee”, nothing could stop Laura achieving her goals.

Having gained a qualification in childcare, Laura set up her own childminding business in 2015 before being hired by Ballyhoura Development, a community-led company with charitable status, the following year to manage an after-school pilot scheme in Caherconlish targeted at vulnerable or disadvantaged families.

By 2017, she was coordinating three successful after-schools across North Cork and Limerick for Ballyhoura which soon became four, overseeing 150 children and 15 staff. It was that September that Laura returned to education with ACE.

Tuesday evenings during term over the next two years were

dedicated to her classes, with another 120 hours given to her second-year placement, based in Kilmallock, working as a facilitator on the East Limerick Traveller Health Baseline Needs Assessment.

That project, a collaboration between Ballyhoura and the HSE Traveller Health Unit, revealed that there were only three Travellers over the age of 65 in East Limerick – less than 1% of the Traveller population there (compared to a national average of 19% across the general population).

“The information those ladies were able to acquire was absolutely outstanding. They blew the Census out of water.

“If you looked at the Census from two years previous, the numbers they got were 113% higher because Traveller ladies went into their own community and asked, ‘Are you a Traveller?’ People said yes, compared to when the Census goes out and people don’t want to tick that box.”

One of the lead researchers is now employed by Ballyhoura and that grassroots work continues to address such shocking health inequalities and improve quality of life for those in the community.

Now or never

For Laura, that placement “opened my eyes to what I really wanted to do” through community work. Her “now or never” moment came soon after when a position opened up in Ballyhoura for a development officer.

She remembers telling UCC

programme coordinator Christina Chasaide about going for the interview – “I’ll never get it,” she said at the time – but didn’t mention the possible move away from childcare to any of her colleagues.

“The after-schools were a separate entity so I wouldn’t have been seen as a candidate in most people’s eyes but the course paid off. I mean I had been working out in all of the communities for years because of the after-schools so I knew the people and I knew how the community works and things like that.

“For me, it was definitely the dream job. It was hard work and determination, especially when you have a full-time job, you have to complete the projects, and a lot of late nights, a lot of coffee, but when you get to the end of it, you forget all of that.

“Obviously I did because I’m

doing a Master’s now. It’s like having children, you forget that part and move on!”

That course, Voluntary and Community Sector Management at UCC, couldn’t be a better fit for Laura’s current role, and even as Covid has put communities at a distance, Laura’s job satisfaction remains immense from knitting them back together.

It comes in the form of little thank you messages from people helped onto courses or schemes in their moment of need and the smiles as participants on their middle-aged-to-retired social hub group see her after being trained up for their first video call: “The second they got it, no job satisfaction can match that. You’ve literally brought somebody out of their house and given them that support and that connection that they are now not alone anymore.”

Laura knows all about those impacts too.

“I’ve seen myself, I’ve done it, how you can go from working on a CE [Community Employment] scheme, going to college at night, going to college full-time, having your own business, working full-time, working in both private and community sectors, and then what doors education opens, no matter what age you are.

“It wouldn’t have been possible either without the amazing support of my husband, Paul, throughout the past 10 years. He believes in me even when I doubt myself and always tells me I can do anything I put my mind to.

“And here I am now, 10 years later from when I first went back to college doing a Master’s, which if you’d said to me 10 years ago you’d be doing

the Masters, I would have been like, no, that’s beyond never going to happen. And the Master’s is so interesting because it literally is my job.”

The doors of opportunity can open for so many more people and that belief feeds into Laura’s daily work.

“It’s not about changing your thinking but broadening your thinking, and you’ll realise very fast where it is you want to go and what your beliefs are.

“I always say when I finish a course, ‘She believed she could, so she did’. That is my mantra. If you believe you can do it you will do it. If you want it and you work hard for it... it won’t come easy, there will be sleepless nights, but it’s worth it.

“And the doors will open. Education is never for nothing. It will always lead to something else.”



The 2020 Farmer of the Year planning to future-proof her business

When an interview was suggested with Caroline Walsh last spring, it came with a warning that finding the time for a chat may be a challenge.

The 2020 Grassland Farmer of the Year was in the midst of calving season on the farm near Ballinascorthy, with the unexpected challenge of home-schooling five children, while also pursuing her studies in UCC, with an assignment due at the end of the month.

Picking up the phone in the middle of sorting out pedigree certs for heifers, Caroline cautions that she has about seven minutes to spare so when someone calls to the door three minutes later, it just underlines how many aspects there are to juggle in this lockdown life.

That she keeps them all going and calls back for double that allotted time is the merest microcosm of the efficient operation she is running in West Cork.

Caroline has always had many strings to her bow, as a reality TV show-winner on the second series of TG4's popular *Feirm Factor* in 2010 and as inventor of the award-winning O'Neill Calf and Sheep Staller, which she developed with her uncle John after seeing her mother repeatedly suffering from a bad back when catching and feeding calves.

Always innovating and looking ahead to the next trend, Caroline has been studying the Diploma in Environment, Sustainability, and Climate since last autumn.

The course itself is particularly innovative in its partnership with the Carbery Greener Dairy programme, of which Caroline is a member. A Recognition of Prior Learning process means the farmers' practical expertise and skills gained through their participation in the programme are academically recognised.

The farmers are awarded 60% of the credits needed for UCC's Level 7 diploma,



Grassland Farmer of the Year for 2020 Caroline Walsh (second left) pictured on the farm in Ballinascorthy with her husband Joe, children Louise, Daniel, Leanne, Katelyn, Conor, and her mother-in-law Ann. *Picture: Donal O'Leary, Irish Farmers Journal*

with exemptions for modules relating to environmental law, environmental impact, environmental monitoring, ecology, and climate, while studying modules relating to geology, GIS [Geographic Information System] mapping, sustainable development, and social policy.

Caroline joined in the third cohort of Carbery farmers to enrol in the course, a decision she jokes was a "higher form of lunacy".

"I said I'd do it to enhance my knowledge of environmental science and soil management more than anything.

"You'd be trying to have a better understanding of it because if you can understand it, you might be able to figure out how better to manage it."

That understanding is already evident in Caroline's work, with the judges for the Grassland Farmer of the Year award noting her emphasis on increasing the amount of grass grown on the farm and

improving the quality of that grass. Her focus on raising profit margins and sustainability has seen Caroline reduce cow numbers from a peak of 80 in 2018 to 64 cows for 2021.

Climate change

But with the help of what she's learning in UCC, she's already planning ahead for more changes to her grass-growing strategy.

She already measures the grass every week so she can quantify how productive each paddock is and where needs attention, while clover has been incorporated into the grassland sward as it contributes to nitrogen fixation from the air into the soil. That means less chemical nitrogen is needed, while using protected urea leads to less emissions.

"We re-seed every year. There's a great grass variety there, AberGain/AberChoice, and it grows a serious amount of grass but the

sward is very open. If we're meant to get a higher predictive rainfall because of the impact of climate change, I don't know whether that variety will stand the test of time.

"If there's going to be more rain then the soil needs to be more porous and root structures need to be better because there's no point in growing a whole load of grass if you can't graze it, if it's going to be damaged easier. So the grassland species you use might be different.

"In a drier year, you could have cows out the 20th of January but the ground needs to dry to let the soil structure be capable of carrying the weight of a cow. That all goes back to your root structure and understanding how permeable your soil is, your rocks underneath it, every-

thing.

"It's a big picture and the course has enabled me to get a better understanding of it."

It is a holistic view, and Caroline is equally invested in making gains whether it's genetics or grazing, but it has to be a business built on a solid ground.

Another area Caroline has embraced through the course is the possibilities of GIS mapping, the subject of that impending assignment.

"I didn't think it could be used in the agricultural industry or realise you could map so much data," she says, pointing to the picture that could be created for disease control by mapping positive cases.

"Information is critical and I just think GIS mapping could be used a lot more in the agricultural industry."

For the national BVD eradication scheme, areas with a cluster of positives could be targeted for a control programme, and for dealing with the likes of Johnes Disease, which can affect dairy herds, publicly mapping pos-

itives could inform farmers' risk assessments when buying from herds.

With so much going on, the return to the classroom, albeit virtually, has posed a challenge.

"It was all fine until the home-schooling came on stream so now you have to prioritise. There's an essay due for the end of February, there's cows calving, there's children needing to be home-schooled, so you have to say right, they're a priority. But hopefully it'll all get done in the finish up.

"The course itself is great for anyone to do because the importance of environmental management, biodiversity, and climate change in the whole agricultural industry is just going to evolve.

"It's like the new buzzword, to protect what's here before us and to be sustainable going forward, and I think there's going to be massive prospects for jobs in it."